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**CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE  
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**Australian Defence Force Oration 2019  
Order of Australia Association (ACT Branch)**

**25 June 2019**

*“Building a Security Community in the Indo-Pacific”*

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet – the Ngunnawal people – and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

I also pay respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed to the defence of Australia in times of peace and war.

It’s an honour to be here to deliver this year’s Australian Defence Force Oration – following previous speakers who have discussed topics ranging from diversity and innovation to the future of the special forces, and the road ahead for joint capabilities.

Tonight, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the breadth of security challenges facing our region, and discuss how Australia, with a focus on the Southwest Pacific, is responding.

My attention will be on our efforts in Defence engagement – building the relationships that help create security – rather than the hard power that enforces it.

Of course, both are essential to achieving the Defence mission of defending Australia and its interests.

Should you be interested, I would direct you to the speeches given by the Minister for Defence, the Vice Chief of the Defence Force and me, at the recent ‘War in 2025’ conference, hosted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute on 13 June 2019, for a detailed view of the ‘hard power’ issues and capability development we’re grappling with on a daily basis; ...both in the realm of conventional war capabilities and the challenges of the grey-zone below the threshold of violent conflict.

With that said, I’m sure you’ll appreciate that for Australia’s defence force, the Indo-Pacific is not unfamiliar.

A century ago, the world was at the tail-end of an influenza pandemic that was on the same terrible scale as the loss of life in the First World War.

Tens-of-millions died between April 1918 and May 1919: the strong, the healthy, the young.

The ‘Spanish flu’ was relentless.

It would leap from ship to shore, and from shore to ship.

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Island communities, especially those of the South Pacific, experienced some of the most severe outbreaks.

Local authorities were unable to cope. Health workers soon started falling ill, and drugs were in short supply.

Back in Sydney, in November 1918, HMAS *Encounter* was ordered to embark as soon as possible to Samoa.

It was to be the Royal Australian Navy's first post-war overseas humanitarian and disaster relief operation.

*Encounter* moved at remarkable speed. Within ten days, it had docked at Suva in Fiji with 150 tonnes of cargo.

Hours later, it was on its way to Apia in Samoa.

It was during that trip to Samoa that the commanding officer, Captain Hugh Thring, asked for volunteers to go ashore if the need proved greater than anticipated.

The work promised to be dangerous and unpleasant.

It meant being left behind, and missing the first peacetime Christmas.

But almost everyone aboard put their hand up.

Australia's defence force has a proud and long history of providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief – and supporting peacekeeping and security missions – in the Indo-Pacific region.

We've always understood that it's more than a collection of countries.

It's Australia's neighbourhood and our community. It's a community that is at its best when its members support and look out for each other.

That appreciation – *that understanding and mindset* – has always been important and valuable. And it will become more so in the decades ahead, as we look to respond to a growing list of regional security challenges.

The Indo-Pacific will be the setting for many of these challenges – and how we respond will be critical to our future security.

The Indo-Pacific's rise in recent times has been nothing short of remarkable.

Over the past decade, the region has contributed to more than two-thirds of global growth, and by the end of the next decade it will account for more than half the world's GDP.

Eight of the ten most populous nations on Earth are located in the Indo-Pacific.

Fifty per cent of the world's population lives here.

It is home to the world's busiest sea lanes and nine of the world's top-ten busiest seaports.

Economic growth has also enabled many military modernisation programs, including our own.

The Indo-Pacific is now home to seven of the world's ten largest standing armies, and unfortunately, six of the world's eight declared nuclear weapons states.

This has meant that, as our new Minister for Defence recently stated at the Shangri-La Dialogue, this prosperous region is becoming more complex and contested.

Today, the Indo-Pacific is a stage upon which many of the uncertainties — and challenges — that define our age are playing out.

Power is shifting.

Intent is less clear-cut.

Strategic risks and costs are rising.

The march of technological disruption, automation and artificial intelligence is set to change our experience of warfare.

Terrorism continues to cast a long shadow.

Climate change is a significant and alarming challenge to many Indo-Pacific nations, especially small Pacific island states.

Cyber activities are blurring the lines between military and civil activity.

The assumptions we've had, over decades, don't necessarily hold today.

This was, of course, outlined in the Foreign Policy and Defence White Papers, which pinpointed six strategic drivers that will shape Australia's security environment to 2035.

These drivers are still relevant; however, several changes are taking place more rapidly than we expected:

- the US–China dynamic is in flux,
- there's greater tension between power and rules in the international system, and
- strategically disruptive technologies affect the calculus of action.

Against this backdrop — as complex as it is — Australia has sought to be clear about our vision for the Indo-Pacific: a stable, secure and prosperous region.

A region where countries engage in dialogue ...

... where disputes are resolved peacefully

... where open markets allow all nations to benefit from economic growth and trade

... where global powers are constructive

... and where institutions and norms are strengthened.

We seek an Indo-Pacific with ASEAN at its heart, in which the US is deeply engaged and where China plays its part in strengthening regional order.

This is a vision we're not shy about articulating — nor are we shy about what we're against, either.

We don't want states undermining the rules-based order ...

... weakening democratic institutions

... threatening cohesion and sovereignty.

We don't want to see self-interest rule, or for might to triumph over right.

But it is also clear that the established rules based order is under severe pressure, and with that pressure comes diminished trust and confidence; essential to a functional system of states.

Australia is stepping up our contribution to regional stability: that's one of our highest defence and security priorities.

We recognise we must do more to preserve and strengthen the institutions that promote regional peace and security.

We must double-down on our relationships with our friends and neighbours, and deepen our engagement and partnerships.

That will be at the core of any effective, long-term response to the security challenges facing the Indo-Pacific today, because these challenges are, or soon will be, simply too great for any one country alone.

Right now, Australia is working on a number of economic and security initiatives, as well as strengthening diplomatic and people-to-people links in the region.

And the Australian Defence Force has – and will continue to have – a crucial role in much of this.

Of course, in some respects, none of this is new or unfamiliar to those in the ADF.

Indeed, it's building on the close history – and the bonds – that missions such as HMAS *Encounter* helped forged a century ago.

But what should be stressed is the *manner* of the engagement.

*That matters.*

That matters just as much as the outcome.

Australia sees itself as a *partner* in these efforts.

Not an owner ...not a director ...not a superior.

We have and we will continue to listen to the wants and the needs of our neighbours; to their aspirations.

Common interest is what, ultimately, shapes and determines our actions.

Australia seeks to assist our neighbours — to help and to support them in ways *they desire* to our common regional benefit.

We recognise them as valued international partners in their own right, able to effectively contribute to our common regional future.

Let me give you a few examples.

I'll start with the transformation of Blackrock in Fiji.

Together with New Zealand, Australia is helping to redevelop Blackrock into a regional hub for peacekeeping and police training, and pre-deployment preparation.

Owned and operated by Fiji, Blackrock will offer whole-of-life cycle support - that's part of what makes it so notable.

It's about learning, development and mission preparation as much as it's about improving the interoperability of our security forces, with real life operational feedback from our joint efforts in UN Peacekeeping missions.

And while Blackrock is the focal point in a physical sense, with time, the lessons, skills and capabilities will have a beneficial effect across the Southwest Pacific.

Another example is Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program.

This program — a cornerstone of our maritime security engagement — will see twenty-one Guardian-class Patrol boats gifted to 12 Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste.

It builds on an earlier, successful, 30 year Pacific Patrol Boat Program, and is supporting the strengthening of a Pacific maritime community — a community that has the capability to contribute to the region's security.

Three boats have already been delivered – including one last Friday at a ceremony in Perth.

It was there that VOEA *Ngahau Koula* was handed to its owners, the Tongan people, replacing VOEA *Savea*, which Australia gifted Tonga in 1991.

It's worth pointing out that – again – Pacific Island countries are the focus.

*Their* capabilities. *Their* interests.

Australia is in the background – crucial and important, of course – but in a technical and advisory support role.

The boats are the most obvious element of this new Program, which also features enhanced maritime aerial surveillance and the development of a Pacific based Fusion Centre; to collate, fuse and disseminate a regional maritime security picture to regional partners.

This engagement mindset also shapes Australia's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts in Southeast Asia; including last year in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

It was under Indonesia's direction that Australia worked with other countries following the devastating earthquake and tsunami.

We provided supplies and internal airlift support.

We helped as we were needed.

The Royal Australian Air Force worked closely with their Indonesian counterparts to transport supplies and conduct evacuations.

...Sixty flights

...360 tonnes of cargo

...190 people evacuated.

The world witnessed the scale of the human tragedy, and a complex response effort.

And the world saw the spirit of cooperation in action.

That spirit is important. And it encompasses more than cooperation.

It's understanding. It's respect. It's a willingness to listen. And a commitment to deliver.

This is what guides us, and it's how we must approach what the Pacific community considers *the* greatest security challenge they face: climate change.

In 2007, the United Nations Security Council held its first debate on the impact of climate change on security.

Robert Aisi, from Papua New Guinea, represented the Pacific Islands Forum.

He spoke of how Pacific Island countries were already impacted by climate change ...

... Of how malaria and dengue were spreading due to climate changed ecosystems in Papua New Guinea.

...Of how the Cook Islands, once considered outside the main cyclone belt, had experienced five cyclones in just one month.

... Of how rising sea temperatures and changing wind patterns were expected to see major tuna stocks migrate westward, causing economic stress to island communities.<sup>1</sup>

Today, climate change-related sea level rise directly threatens lower-lying countries.

Along with the other member states of the Pacific Islands Forum, we signed the Boe Declaration: Australia is committed to responding to this challenge.

The frequency and severity of climatic events in the Pacific has increased and so too has the rate and scale of the ADF response.

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<sup>1</sup> ROBERT G, AISI (Papua New Guinea) statement: [United Nations, Press Release: Security Council holds first-ever debate on impact of climate change on peace, security, hearing over 50 speakers, 17 April 2017](#)

Overall, our Indo-Pacific Step-Up – some of which I’ve outlined – and the Defence Cooperation Program which has been, and continues to be, the vehicle of our Indo-Pacific engagement for decades, are geared towards doing more across a broad range of security challenges and engagements: multi-lateral exercises, strategic dialogues, strengthening norms, training and exchange programs, etc.

Being present. Working *with* our neighbours. Building *their* and *our* security resilience.

Australia is playing its part. And we are, I emphasise, stepping up — *not starting up* – right across the Indo-Pacific region.

After reaching Samoa, HMAS *Encounter*’s mission was supposed to end.

But Captain Thring had received a message during the ship’s brief stop in Fiji.

The conditions in Tonga, he was told, were at least as bad as in Samoa.

The facilities were worse.

So Thring made a decision: he would extend the mission.

Two days after visiting Samoa — where She dropped off personnel and supplies — *Encounter* reached Nuku’alofa in Tonga.

Thring sent his last surgeon ashore, accompanied by five orderlies.

They took with them the remaining drugs.

It was a small contribution — but one that made a big difference to the Tongan community.

Captain Thring made the right decision.

It is one that Australia can look back on with pride.

We would do the same today for any of our neighbours.

But we would be there because of their decision, not ours.

Over the next two decades, the Australian Defence Force will be part of Australia’s response to the security challenges that confront our region – the Indo-Pacific.

This evening I’ve deliberately focussed on what is often considered the ‘soft skills’ of Defence. Plenty is written and discussed with regard to our new future submarine program, grey-zone cyber attacks and tensions in the South China Sea or some other regional hot spot.

But building and managing security has to start with relationships.

Our servicemen and women will, very often, be the on-the-ground faces representing Australia’s broader interest in strong partnerships, based on mutual respect and understanding.

History shows that we were well placed to do this.

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We have the understanding. We have the mindset. And we know what must be done.

Above all, it's the manner of our engagement, the trust we create, the patterns of cooperation we display. These are as important as, and essential to, the common outcome we seek to achieve: a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Thank you.

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