Army in the littoral

AUSTRALIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY will be judged by what the Australian Defence Force (ADF) can do across the approaches to our north. Ships and aircraft will be indispensable, but they cannot alone secure the ports, airfields and coastal terrain from which a campaign must be fought. Army's shift to littoral operations answers a central question for the future force: what must land forces do to make maritime strategy work?

The answer begins with geography. Australia's northern approaches are an archipelago of islands, passages and long distances. Movement through them depends on access to particular waterways and facilities ashore. A land force positioned on relevant terrain can observe those routes, protect sensors and weapon systems and complicate an adversary's use of them. It can also defend the infrastructure that allows Australian and partner forces to operate. In this setting, control of land has consequences at sea.

That gives Army a role in deterrence by denial. A ship or aircraft may strike a target and move on. A land force can remain, sustain its presence and require an opponent to plan around it. Dispersed forces equipped with sensors and long-range fires could make selected approaches dangerous to use, particularly if they can move before an adversary locates and attacks them. Australian land force elements do not need to hold every island or cover every passage. It needs options to establish and shift credible points of denial as a campaign develops.

The *2026 Integrated Investment Program* (IIP) offers many of the building blocks. Land 8710's landing ships and landing craft and amphibious vehicles address the movement and resupply of forces between shore and sea. The High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) firing Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System munitions and the Precision Strike Missile extend the reach of land-based fires. Infantry fighting vehicles and other combined arms capabilities help protect and manoeuvre the force ashore. Their strategic value will depend less on each platform's individual performance than on whether they



ABOVE: Australian soldiers take part in a live fire counter-landing activity during Exercise Balikatan 2026 in the Philippines. *Image: Aust DoD*



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can be assembled into a force that deploys, finds targets, fights and survives, then gets redistributed to do it all again.

Army cannot build that system alone. Navy must protect movement into a theatre and along the routes that sustain it. Surface combatants, submarines and unmanned surface and undersea vessels and vehicles can contest access and gather intelligence beyond the reach of forces ashore. Army can help secure ports, coastal operating areas and the ground needed to support naval activity. Landing craft connect the two services physically, but their effective use also depends on sea control, mine countermeasures and the steady movement of fuel and ammunition.

Air power supplies surveillance, reach and responsiveness. The MQ-4C Triton and P-8A Poseidon can contribute to the maritime picture, while other manned and unmanned aircraft can investigate contacts, strike targets, transport supplies and defend forward forces. Space-enabled navigation, communications and surveillance help connect these activities. Cyber and electronic warfare shape whether the resulting information can be trusted and used. In the littoral, a land-based weapon is only as useful as the joint force's ability to find a target, identify it and pass that information to a commander in time.

This is where the practical test for the joint force lies. A contact detected at sea must remain tracked long enough for a decision to be made. The force must establish who has authority to engage, account for nearby friendly and civilian activity and ensure that the weapon can reach a valid target. After firing, it must move, reload and continue operating under attack. The advertised range of a missile tells us little about whether the ADF can complete that sequence. Targeting, command arrangements, protection and sustainment will determine the result.

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Access is another constraint. Land forces operating from a partner's territory require consent, established relationships and arrangements that can withstand political pressure in a crisis. Australia must invest in those relationships during peacetime, while developing its own northern bases and approaches. A littoral force cannot be designed around the assumption that every useful location will be available when required.

None of this reduces Army to a missile force stationed on islands. Land forces can gain and hold terrain, protect the forward elements of a joint operation, secure routes and facilities and defeat an adversary that comes ashore. They can stay and adapt when an initial strike has passed and the campaign becomes a contest of endurance. Those are distinct contributions to maritime strategy, grounded in what soldiers can do on land.

We should, therefore, always ask ourselves how the IIP's investments combine to produce a credible littoral force. Can Australia deploy it to useful terrain, connect it to the wider maritime picture, sustain it under attack and move it when the situation changes?

Preserving Army's role means giving land forces clear operational tasks within the maritime campaign and the means to carry them out. The littoral is a system and the ground within it matters. DTR