

2022 Indian Ocean Defence and Security Conference (IODSC)

Address by His Excellency the Honourable Chris Dawson APM Governor of Western Australia

Thursday, 25 August 2022

I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation – and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Many thanks to Vivienne and Morton Hansen for the Welcome to Country, and also to Professor Gordon Flake for the introduction.

It is indeed a privilege to be here today at such a critically important conference.

If ever there was a time to be gathering to discuss the security and defence capabilities of our nation and in particular where our state stands in it - geographically, strategically and industrially - it is now.

I thank the state government via Defence West for the focus they bring to our defence industry capabilities.

I also commend Perth USAsia Centre and the UWA Defence and Security Institute for their considerable efforts to forge stronger, more relevant strategic engagements in the Indo-Pacific region.

We are fortunate to have ‘thinkers’ of great calibre here in Western Australia, who have recognised for some time the magnitude of our role in the Indo-Pacific dialogue.

I also wish to acknowledge my predecessor the Honourable Kim Beazley AC for the drive, energy and impact he has brought to the defence focus and progression in Western Australia during his four years as Governor, and on the political and diplomatic stage before that.

I look around this room and a better collective of defence experts and industry you’d be hard pushed to find, and a credit to all involved in returning bigger, and stronger than ever from the ravishes that COVID-19 thrust upon events and conferences in recent years.

For those of you who have traversed the border to be here today I extend a particularly warm Western Australian welcome.

As Governor of this State I warn you though, that I will be unashamedly parochial in what I say here today, as a big part of my role as Governor is to advocate in the best interests of WA.

We are in a new era in defence. One where geography calls the shots and where Western Australia, and its nearly 21,000 kilometres of coastline including islands, takes on an ever-increasing importance in Australia’s defence and strategic frontier.

I also welcome and acknowledge our Western Australian defence leaders, and our local leaders of industry.

Before me I see and sense a home-grown defence industry capability that is stronger and more willing than ever to meet the needs of a rapidly changing geo-strategic and geo-political landscape.

We need little reminder as we meet here today we do so in the midst of a challenging and changing world structure. With that comes new responsibility, new opportunities and new understanding of the significance of this western front, and what it can contribute to the security and defence of our country.

Let's not forget we've been here before – albeit in a very different form – where our state found itself negotiating the need to protect itself, and in turn protect its nation.

80 years ago we rose to defend our national and state borders, and its people from global threats and we did it with the same initiative, fortitude and can-do attitude that is required of us today.

This conflict is not a distant memory assigned simply to the history books, but one that lives on in Western Australia's more than 350 surviving Second World War Veterans, as well as those who will never forget when war came to Western Australia in the shape of more than 20 air raid attacks across the state – targets including Broome, Wyndham, Derby, Port Hedland, Onslow, Carnot Bay, Kalumburu, Cape Londonderry, Koolama Bay, and the Exmouth Gulf.

The Indian Ocean was also a battleground.

The confrontation between Japanese raiders and HMIS Bengal as it escorted the Dutch Tanker Ondina to the Cocos Islands. And of course, Australia's greatest ever naval tragedy – the sinking of HMAS Sydney (II) and the loss of all 645 crew on board in a brutal encounter with the German Raider HSK Kormoran off our coast in 1941.

Now, as then, we find ourselves in a defence and security dialogue that reflects our geographic, strategic and global significance.

It is no secret that our regional architecture is morphing dramatically.

Political and public consciousness of the importance of the Indo-Pacific region has been surging for some time, but now more than ever there's a new gravitational pull, a new realisation of how commanding the 'Indo' in Indo-Pacific really is.

Across these next two days you will address some of the most critical factors relating to our Indian Ocean location:

- Sovereignty of supply chains;
- Protection of essential resources;
- Strengthening of alliances with Indian Ocean nations;
- The region's economic and strategic security;
- And most crucially the role of Western Australia and its defence industry in all of the above.

On that final point I am about to get, as promised, quite parochial and pointed.

WA has produced amongst the greatest of innovators, the brightest of minds and the most productive 'can-doers' you will find anywhere.

Our state by land mass is just over 2.5 million square kilometres – one of the largest jurisdictions in the world – and in many areas some of the most hostile natural environment you will find - so it's only natural that what we do here and how we do it, is unlike anywhere else.

We are global leaders in resource technologies and remote operations.

We are partnering with world heavyweights in robotics, space technologies, cyber security, communications, and engineering systems.

Our shipbuilding and undersea technologies are world-class, and our defence research ground-breaking.

We have a state government willing to step up, a defence industry ready for the next challenge, and an innovation sector primed to respond.

When it comes to building this nation's sovereign capability, Western Australia is the engine-room.

Our state, and the northern half in particular, is one of Australia's most vital areas of resource.

Our existing and emerging resources and critical minerals are game-changing on a global scale, and they need to be protected.

The chorus of calls for greater defence capabilities on this 'new' western front are growing louder by the day, and whilst the politics of that are best left for others to debate and discuss, I will say this.

Prior to becoming Governor I spent my 46 year career defending our community.

Defending against crime, defending against terrorism, and most recently defending against the unpredictable menace of a deadly global virus.

What that latest battle has taught me is that this state, more than any other, knows all too well how to mobilise and defend itself successfully against a threat.

We did that by initiating a clear and efficient strategy, and by drawing on the innovative mind-set of government and industry to rapidly and effectively build the capability of our assets and our people.

We locked out the COVID-19 virus for two years without locking down our community and industry.

We demonstrated a capacity to tackle a life-threatening problem head on, and to make tough decisions when it mattered, all the while ensuring that this state as the economic powerhouse of the nation, stayed calm and carried on.

What we also did was collaborate, and coordinate.

We joined forces once again with our most enduring historical allies the UK and the US, and we drew on this trilateral partnership to utilise each other's strengths and expertise to develop medical armoury to keep our communities safe.

At the same time our present-day partners and neighbours – India, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore and many other nations in the Indo-Pacific – were also mobilising their own defences against this viral global threat.

What does this have to do with the defence and security of the Indian Ocean, and in particular Western Australia?

Well, it speaks to a mind-set, an attitude, a willingness to act, an ability to build a campaign of resilience and get the job done.

In coming months our nation's leaders will receive a comprehensive review of Australia's defence capabilities and following that a likely shaping of additional initiatives under the AUKUS alliance.

Both of which provide new opportunities for all of you in this room today.

Opportunities through AUKUS in areas of defence capability and critical technology that we know already exist in this state and are just waiting to be fully utilised:

- Cyber capabilities
- Artificial intelligence
- Quantum technologies and;
- Undersea capabilities

Therefore, I encourage all of you over the next two days of discussion and dialogue to stake your claim as willing and capable contributors to the future of Australia's evolving defence strategy.

We should not be captured by tradition or bound by past approaches. The rapidly emerging relevance of the Indian Ocean demands new thinking and new plans.

Send a strong and clear message to our nation's decision-makers that Western Australia has a rightful place in the frontline of defence, a key seat at the table in its trilateral alliance, and a leading role in defence industry capabilities and investment.

And, if I can finish today with one other important point.

Whilst it is paramount that we have the right assets, the smartest technology, and the greatest innovation in this state...none of that will work without the best people.

There is scope for great transferability of skills across our defence services, our defence industries, and our broader resource and technology sectors.

So, I challenge you to be ground breakers, to lead the way in how we build our workforces and our alliances in this state.

Together let's shape and support a workforce capability in Western Australia that harnesses the tactical and technological expertise to lead this nation to a new era of defence and industry capability.

I thank you once again for the opportunity to be here today, and I wish the 2022 Indian Ocean Defence and Security Conference, and all of you attending, a productive and successful event.

Thank you.