# Australia faces strategic challenge as seabed governance becomes new geopolitical battleground



Concerns over undersea cables have recently intensified in Australian political and strategic discourse, particularly after the sighting of a Chinese research vessel near Australia’s southern coastline in late March. Opposition leader Peter Dutton suggested that the ship was likely engaged in “mapping undersea cables,” a claim echoed by others. However, analysis from The Strategist, ASPI’s analysis and commentary site, points to an emerging and broader strategic focus: the seabed itself is becoming a crucial domain where geopolitical influence will be contested, governance rules challenged, and regional alliances tested.

Two notable developments illustrate this shift. In February, the government of the Cook Islands signed a deal with China granting licences for seabed surveys, marking a significant step in bilateral cooperation over seabed resource exploration. Shortly thereafter, The Metals Company (TMC), based in Vancouver, initiated lobbying efforts in the United States to bypass the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and obtain direct permits for commercial seabed mining.

These actions reveal the intensifying great-power rivalry over critical minerals found in the seabed, which are vital components for the digital infrastructure and green energy sectors. They also underscore a geopolitical and economic contest that transcends the previous narrow focus on cable security.

The International Cable Protection Committee identifies seabed mining as the foremost long-term threat to undersea cables. Mining operations involving dredging, sediment disruption, and mechanical equipment pose risks of physical damage that can prove irreversible for these cables. Given that most cable routes are already publicly known, concerns centre less on activities like cable mapping and more on exploratory research missions potentially setting the stage for future seabed resource extraction.

The ISA, established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), regulates seabed mining to some extent. Although it has not yet issued mining licences, it has granted multiple exploratory permits, with China as its principal funder and key stakeholder. China has systematically expanded its influence over seabed governance by securing numerous exploration contracts through international mechanisms and regional partnerships. The Cook Islands’ agreement with China exemplifies this strategic trajectory aimed at ensuring access to critical seabed resources.

In contrast, the United States has not ratified UNCLOS nor recognised the ISA’s authority. Frustrated by the ISA’s slow progress and the growing momentum for a global moratorium on seabed mining, companies such as TMC are advocating for unilateral US regulatory action. TMC cites the 1980 Deep Seabed Hard Mineral Resources Act as legal justification for Washington to independently authorise seabed mining. Reports suggest the Trump administration is considering an executive order to permit deep-sea extraction activities in international waters outside the UNCLOS framework.

Such a move could establish a precedent for other major powers including China and Russia to eschew established seabed governance norms, engendering a patchwork of self-authorised claims. This scenario is likely to undermine international oversight and diminish protections for smaller Pacific island nations that support a moratorium on seabed mining.

Countries like Papua New Guinea, which experienced the collapse of the Nautilus Minerals deep-sea mining project, may soon face considerable pressure to form partnerships with dominant mining interests. Meanwhile, the Cook Islands have simultaneously condemned international inaction on climate change while embracing deep-sea mining domestically with its attendant environmental consequences. Two Australian states have prohibited offshore mining, yet Australia did not join over thirty countries calling for a seabed mining moratorium, reflecting ongoing tensions between Canberra’s stance on climate action and perspectives held by Pacific island countries.

The commentary highlights that these divergent national behaviours do not necessarily represent hypocrisy but rather reflect how individual countries pursue their interests within sector-specific contexts both above and below the waterline. This complexity poses challenges for developing a cohesive regional strategy but does not render it impossible.

Australia’s current posture is characterised as “staying on the fence,” with neither a leadership role in shaping regional seabed governance rules nor evident preparation for operations under these emerging regulations. Its concern with cable security appears narrowly focused on threats of espionage or sabotage, rather than addressing broader structural changes and geopolitical transformations.

In the Pacific, the predominant destabilising factor is not a single Chinese vessel but rather the gradual erosion of regulatory frameworks, the expansion of commercial seabed exploitation, and the increasing willingness of actors to assert control over seabed resources independently.

Under UNCLOS, states must exercise “due regard” when their activities overlap, such as between subsea cables and seabed mining operations. However, there are currently no binding rules specifying how this due regard should be observed or mechanisms for resolving disputes specific to cable-mining interactions. Consequently, the default approach has been one of avoidance and ambiguity.

The article suggests Australia could assume a proactive role by initiating a regional dialogue to formalise operational norms. These could include commitments to early notification of activities, transparent consultation processes, and measures to mitigate environmental risks. Such an effort would translate the concept of due regard into a tangible, Pacific-specific code of conduct.

Ultimately, the seabed represents the emerging frontline of strategic competition in the Pacific region. The analysis warns that failure by Australia to engage constructively will not only undermine its ability to secure undersea cable interests but also risk collateral damage from the broader destabilisation of regional governance.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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