

New Access for U.S. Forces in Australia: Is it driven by China?

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What is happening?

A substantial enhancement in US-Australia military ties first referred to approximately one year ago now appears to be materializing. A range of media outlets report that President Obama’s upcoming visit to Australia will feature an announcement of an agreement that gives US Navy and Marine Corps personnel “permanent and constant access” to existing facilities in Darwin (The Australian). They would be hosted at the Robertson Barracks, a major Australian Army base near Darwin (The Sydney Morning Herald).

According to Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith, the agreement will also allow pre-positioning of U.S. supplies and equipment for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance (Australian Dep. of Defense). Defense Minister Smith also has noted that he expects (from the U.S. military) “more troops in, troops out, more ships in, ships out and more planes in and planes out. And the Territory is an obvious prospect with some of the Defence facilities that we have here, both in and around Darwin, but in the [Northern] Territory generally.” A higher tempo of visits by U.S. forces will further enhance the already substantial interoperability of the U.S. and Australian armed forces.

It bears noting that the Royal Australian Air Force’s (RAAF), considers RAAF Darwin to be one of its “main forward operating bases.” In addition, there is a possibility that the precedent set by access to Darwin opens the door for greater U.S. access to RAAF Tindal, a key F/A-18 base located in the Northern Territory, as well as other facilities. The RAAF’s heavy use of U.S.-made aircraft means that RAAF bases already have the necessary maintenance infrastructure to service a range of key U.S. platforms that could pass through, including the C-17, F/A-18C, and F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet. Putting Marines at Robertson Barracks also raises the possibility of building on the existing joint training center at Bradshaw Field via increased reciprocal Australian access to U.S. base facilities for training and other purposes.

What it means

- The Pentagon is making another positive step in re-affirming that the U.S. is downsizing to some extent in the Middle East and refocusing on the Asia-Pacific region.
- The U.S. is also confirming Australia’s great importance as an ally.
- The level of trust Australia is showing the U.S. in granting greater basing access is being reciprocated by the U.S. willingness to sell Australia some of its most advanced weapons, including the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet and the stealthy AGM-158 cruise

missile. Australia is also participating in the development of the F-35 Lightning II and could potentially purchase up to 100 aircraft if the program can overcome delays and cost overruns (Reuters).

- The U.S. and Australia have a 60-year history of military cooperation and this positive historical backdrop, coupled with a high cultural affinity and virtually identical language, make diplomacy less complicated than with other regional partners.
- The large and relatively unpopulated maritime and land areas of Northwestern Australia are strategically important due to their mineral wealth and relative proximity to the Indonesian Archipelago. Basing access there therefore reflects Australia's increasingly serious strategic posture in the region.
- The basing access also provides additional opportunities for joint exercises between Australian and U.S. forces.
- The U.S. can bolster its security and balancing influence in Southeast Asia from a more diversified footprint. This spares allies like Singapore and Thailand the political complexity that would likely result from a significant expansion of U.S. base access in those countries.

What it doesn't mean

- Closer military cooperation between Canberra and Washington is unlikely to significantly irritate or concern China, which has had plenty of forewarning that the two countries' longstanding military cooperation in other theaters is now increasing in the Indian Ocean/Asia-Pacific region.
- Australia's burgeoning trade relationship with China is unlikely to suffer. Trade volumes between China and the U.S. and China and Japan have risen strongly in recent years despite growing tensions. In addition, Australia supplies commodities that China would likely have trouble sourcing in equivalent volumes from other producers, particularly iron ore that would otherwise have to come from Brazil, the other major global exporter.
- Closer Australia-U.S. security ties will not reduce the importance of the security relationships Washington has with its other Asian treaty allies (Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and Thailand). Rather, it will complement them by reassuring regional governments that the U.S. intends to remain involved in Asia for decades to come.
- Contrary to what some commentators assert, the U.S.-Australia security partnership is not at all akin to that which the U.S. has maintained with Saudi Arabia. In contrast, ties

between Canberra and Washington have been, are, and will continue to be driven by common values first and narrow economic and security interests second.

- This move is about “places, not bases.” Washington seeks access that helps further facilitate the two countries’ regionally beneficial security cooperation.

Key strategic impacts

- Reflects that Australian leaders increasingly recognize that their country’s growing economic relationship with China does not change the fact that it shares a congruent set of values and goals with the U.S. (and not China per se) regarding how it would like to see the region evolve.
- Regional countries are likely more comfortable with the relatively transparent U.S. agenda in the Asia-Pacific region, as opposed to the Chinese vision, which in some ways seems to evolve toward an ever-harder-edged approach as the country’s power increases. China’s growing use of “gunboat diplomacy” in the South China Sea is a case in point.
- Could set the stage for wider access, including aircraft, if future contingencies warranted such a move.
- Helps cement continued U.S. relevance in diplomatic and security issues in East/Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region.
- Guam is well situated for exerting influence in East Asia, but is limited in its ability to reinforce Diego Garcia rapidly in the event of contingencies in the Indian Ocean region due to the “tyranny of distance.” In contrast, assets stationed in Darwin would be roughly equidistant between the central Malacca Strait and central portion of the South China Sea (~3,500 km to each), making them “swing assets” potentially able to complement both Diego Garcia for operations east of Malacca and Guam for contingencies in East and Southeast Asia.

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China SignPost™ 洞察中国 founders Dr. Andrew Erickson and Mr. Gabe Collins have more than a decade of combined government, academic, and private sector experience in Mandarin Chinese language-based research and analysis of China. Dr. Erickson is an Associate Professor at the U.S. Naval War College’s China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) and an Associate in Research at Harvard’s John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. Mr. Collins is a J.D. candidate at the University of Michigan Law School and focuses on commodity and security issues in China, Russia, and Latin America.

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