

## STRATEGIC SNAPSHOTS

## SNAPSHOT 9

# Resident Power: The Case for An Enhanced US Military Presence in Australia

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The United States is here to stay in Asia. That was the message senior US officials hammered home at the Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) in Melbourne late last year. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared, "We've been here, we are here, and we will be here."<sup>1</sup> Defense Secretary Robert Gates concurred: "We are looking for an enhanced presence for the United States in Asia and not some sort of cutback," he noted.<sup>2</sup> Washington was clearly determined to restore regional confidence in America's staying power in the Pacific.

Among the most concrete expressions of this diplomatic offensive was an AUSMIN agreement to enhance the US military presence in Australia. The two governments established a bilateral working group to develop options that would broaden US access to Australian facilities and bases, among other cooperative activities.<sup>3</sup> Yet, even as the planning for this new arrangement proceeds, America's national mood appears to be moving in the opposite direction. Calls for retrenchment and "offshore balancing"—code for a neo-isolationist strategy—are gaining currency in the United States. At a minimum, policymakers in both countries must persuasively answer two simple questions: Why Australia? Why now? Clarity of purpose is thus invaluable.

The strategic and operational rationales for this shift in US posture are compelling. The creaking Cold War-era basing infrastructure, the new requirements for meeting post-9/11 security threats, the dual rise of China and India, and the proliferation of precision strike weapons are all eroding the basic underpinnings of American power in the Pacific. While basing options in Australia are not a panacea, they offer some relief from these challenges. The plan that leaders at AUSMIN endorsed represents a sound measure for shoring up the US position in Asia. The following is

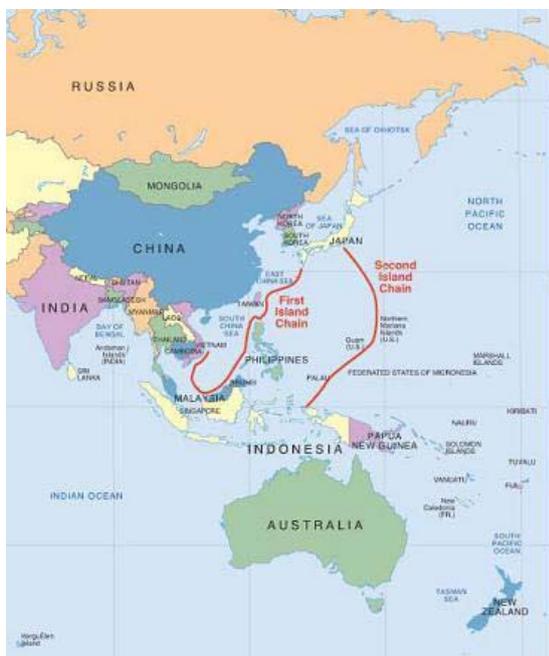
a brief assessment of the factors that make Australia an attractive candidate for an expanding US presence.

Over the past decade, US defence planners have sought to redistribute the weight of the US forward presence around the world to cope with a much broader range of contingencies and threats. The Pentagon recognised that the colossal basing infrastructures in Western Europe and Northeast Asia were out of step with the realities of the post-Soviet security environment. Massive bases in those two regions tied down large conventional forces directed at a Cold War enemy that no longer existed. Home to high-value assets, hostile powers could be tempted to hold these locations hostage by threatening them with long-range missiles and other strike systems. The bases were also vulnerable to the fickle goodwill of host nations whose domestic constituents were often strongly opposed to the intrusive US presence. The basing architecture of the postwar era was simply unsuited to the post-9/11 world.

To remedy this obsolescence, the 2004 Global Posture Review launched a restructuring process to substantially reduce troop levels, overhaul existing bases, and establish new access agreements across the globe. A three-tiered system would provide US forces with the flexibility to respond to crises and conflicts of varying intensity while reducing the visibility of US presence on foreign soil.<sup>4</sup> But the plan also required the diplomatic agility to forge new relationships that would open the door to less formal basing agreements. In short, Washington embarked on a more or less open-ended endeavour to seek access wherever it is available and whenever the need arises.

This quest for basing options is coinciding with America's new geostrategic priorities in maritime Asia. The 2007 Maritime Strategy vowed to stage preponderant combat forces in the

Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf for the foreseeable future.<sup>5</sup> This declaration signaled a dramatic departure for the US Navy, which had fashioned its identity as a two-ocean navy poised to fight in the Atlantic and Pacific. To the architects of the strategy, great-power discord and hegemonic challengers were most likely to emerge in the eastern and southern rimlands of Eurasia. These new centres of gravity thus compelled the United States to exercise predominant sea power in East and South Asia. By concentrating fleet operations east of the Suez, moreover, the US Navy would in effect become an Indo-Pacific navy. To facilitate this transformation, new basing arrangements would be needed.



**Figure 1: Indo-Pacific Asia**

The growth of Chinese and Indian sea power will accelerate the “Asianisation” of the US Navy. As New Delhi and Beijing look seaward, both powers will jostle for influence and advantage across the entire Indo-Pacific maritime theatre. China’s energy insecurity will beckon its attention toward the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, through which the vast majority of the nation’s oil must pass, while India’s blue-water ambitions will draw it into the Western Pacific. The convergence and perhaps collision of these two powers at sea will likely unfold at critical junctures of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, most notably in the Malacca Strait. In short, the sources of naval competition will no longer be confined to Northeast Asian waters, where the US Navy has traditionally dominated. As the locus of great power interactions drifts southward toward Australia, questions about the future disposition of US naval forces, namely the stationing of the fleet, will gain urgency.

A quick glance at the map will show that the existing basing architecture is not optimally configured to meet the emerging challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The principal hubs for forward-deployed US sea power in Asia are scattered among bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, well east and north of where great-power maritime encounters are most likely to unfold. Naval forces and the facilities that support them are largely concentrated at one opposite extreme of the vast Eurasian landmass. Sustained peacetime cruises far from Asian homeports not only hasten the wear and tear on the fleet, but they can also incur mounting operating costs. In crisis or wartime conditions, geographic distance from the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific slows efforts to concentrate the fleet for action. And along the way, naval units bound westward depend on free passage through such narrow seas as the Luzon, Malacca, and the Lombok and Sunda straits. Should China contest or close these chokepoints, the prospects for quick reaction will dim accordingly.

But the tyranny of geography is not the only challenge. Regional bases from which the United States projects its naval power have become exceedingly vulnerable to ballistic and cruise missile attacks. The rapid growth of Chinese precision strike systems, in particular, calls into question longstanding assumptions that US forces can easily access and safely use forward bases in Northeast Asia.<sup>6</sup> Japan, the linchpin of US strategy in Asia, has not escaped this technical-military trend. China is presently capable of launching hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles in coordinated salvos to pummel Kadena air base, the hub of American airpower in Asia, rendering it inoperable in a matter of hours. Equally troubling, air and naval bases located along the entire Japanese archipelago are well within reach of China’s expanding arsenal of theatre-range missiles. In short, the forward basing formula that has underwritten US regional pre-eminence since the end of World War II is rapidly losing its potency. The potential loss of sanctuaries in eastern Eurasia thus places a high premium on finding alternative sites for power projection.

Yet, other basing options less susceptible to anti-access threats are not perfect substitutes. At first glance, Singapore appears ideal for US strategic purposes, lying as it does at the interface between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The city-state’s Changi naval base also boasts facilities and piers built specifically to accommodate US aircraft carriers. Nevertheless, political obstacles stand in the way. Caught between large neighbours and covetous great powers, Singapore would likely be loath to antagonise Beijing by permanently hosting a US Navy battle fleet. The city-state also lies just within the maximum range of Chinese theatre strike systems, meaning that a fleet stationed there would be exposed to pre-emptive attack in port.

Other alternatives lack scale. Guam boasts a deep-draft harbor and possesses the wherewithal to provide transient logistical

support to carriers. Guam is also American territory, providing US forces the freedom of action that may be unavailable to those based on foreign soil. An attack on the island would constitute a direct attack on the United States, thus immunising it from alliance-splitting strategems involving threats against US bases in East Asia. However, the island's small size and underdeveloped physical infrastructure constrain its capacity to support or home port substantial components of the US Seventh Fleet. While Guam still lies largely beyond the striking range of Chinese missiles, its sanctuary status is not likely to be permanent: limited numbers of cruise missiles launched from Chinese bombers can already hit the island and before long China may also field other missile systems with the range to reach Guam. Located nearly two thousand kilometres south of the Indian subcontinent, Diego Garcia is centrally located in the Indo-Pacific and will remain safe from Chinese missiles for some time to come. But the tiny atoll is twenty times smaller than Guam, severely limiting its growth potential to accommodate a larger US naval presence.

In this context Australia's geostrategic importance to the United States is coming into sharp focus. Australia enjoys numerous advantages. The island continent occupies a central position between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific theatres, potentially enabling naval forces to shift between the two oceans. While the majority of its naval bases are located on the east coast, Australia possesses important facilities in the north and the west from which maritime forces can deploy to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The relative proximity to these maritime theatres would cut down transit times by as much as half from Hawaii and more from San Diego. Warships and submarines based in Western Australia would benefit from direct access to the Indian Ocean, freeing them from the risks of passing through chokepoints and narrow seas. HMAS Stirling, a major naval base located in southwestern Australia, offers ready access to large offshore training ranges and other support facilities.



**Figure 2: Australia's naval facilities**

Moreover, Australian bases are well outside the threat envelope of Chinese theatre strike systems. To hit the homeland, China would have to launch enormously expensive intercontinental ballistic missiles. The cost of delivering conventional payloads of limited yield over such long distances would be prohibitive, even with China's deep pockets. Short of some transformative breakthrough in missile technology or the placement of Chinese missiles much further afield, Australia would likely remain a sanctuary for many years to come. Unlike Guam and Diego Garcia, Australia boasts strategic depth in both economic and geographic terms. As an advanced industrialised economy, it possesses the technical foundation, the human capital, and the critical infrastructure to support naval facilities. Secure internal lines of communications would also facilitate mutually supporting resupply overland.

But Australia, too, suffers from some drawbacks. Its geographic isolation is as much a liability as it is an asset. While Chinese missiles cannot threaten Australian territory, naval forces based there would labour to reach key theatres of operations in the Indo-Pacific. Consider some of the distances involved: HMAS Stirling is over 5,600 kilometres from Sanya naval base on China's Hainan Island, while Diego Garcia is over 5,200 kilometres from Stirling. Australia's Collins-class submarines, based at Stirling, would likely struggle to reach their patrol stations in the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea. Built to lurk and wait for their prey, these diesel-electric boats are ill-suited for marathon transits. Naval flotillas would also have to venture through the narrow seas of the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos that enclose the South China Sea. Should China contest access to that body of water, warships must force their way through chokepoints where submarine ambushes would almost certainly await them. These risks, however, add to the appeal of basing US nuclear-powered submarines, which do not suffer from limits to range and endurance.

What is one to make of this dizzying array of variables that must factor into decisions about US basing in Australia? The new global posture review currently under way offers some answers. The strategic guidance for this review posits three useful criteria for evaluating existing and prospective bases. To optimise the US defence posture, forward presence in Asia must be:

1. distributed more evenly across the region;
2. durable and survivable enough to support a range of operations; and
3. politically acceptable to the host government and the people it represents.

The analysis above suggests that Australia easily meets the first two standards. With respect to the third, the Australian public

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may be more receptive than US and Australian defence planners anticipate: according to the Lowy Institute's 2011 foreign policy poll, 55 per cent of Australians are in favour of basing US military forces in Australia (20 per cent strongly in favour). By contrast 43 per cent are opposed (22 per cent strongly). While a vocal minority is likely to oppose an enhanced US military presence, these figures suggest that mainstream opinion would respond positively to a clearly-presented argument.

Much depends on the actual modalities of basing arrangements. Very large and intrusive bases like the Yokosuka and Sasebo naval facilities in Japan could be too much of a stretch and probably do not make strategic sense in any case. But flexible, low-impact arrangements modeled on US access to Changi naval base in Singapore are feasible politically and logistically. By all accounts, some variation of the Singaporean model will likely be the basis of bilateral cooperation.

Finally, the logic of necessity should not be the only determinant of basing decisions in Australia. Nor should clinical calculations of geographic advantage dictate the terms of US engagement with Australia. Both Canberra and Washington share a profound desire to uphold the current maritime system, premised as it is on unfettered access to the commons. The preponderance of American and allied seapower has been indispensable to the legitimacy of the neoliberal norms upon which such free access rests. If US use of Australian bases and facilities helps defend this international order, then the costs and burdens associated with these new commitments are worth it.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Lowy Institute's MacArthur Asia Security Project explores evolving strategic relations among Asia's major powers. Based on a realistic understanding of the region's competitive dynamics in a range of key domains, the Project aims to develop a practical agenda for security cooperation across Asia and a suite of measures to ensure that competition does not lead to miscalculation or conflict.

## NOTES

- 1 Brendan Nicholson and Paul Kelly, Beijing must play by the rules, *The Australian*, November 9, 2010, accessed online at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/beijing-must-play-by-the-rules/story-fn59niix-1225949637351>
- 2 Nicole Gaouette, Gates says U.S. to increase Asia military presence, Australia defense ties, *Bloomberg*, November 8, 2010, accessed online at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-11-08/gates-says-u-s-to-increase-asia-military-presence-australia-defense-ties.html>
- 3 Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations, 2010, *Joint Communique*, Melbourne, 8 November 2010, accessed online at <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2010/AUSMIN-Joint-Communique.pdf>
- 4 A few of the large Cold War-era bases would undergo upgrades to serve as power projection hubs. Expeditionary units would routinely rotate through a new network of lightly attended facilities. Other minimally-equipped sites would stand ready to absorb sudden influxes of US military forces. For background on the 2004 US Global Force Posture Review, see United States Senate Armed Services Committee, *The global posture review of United States military forces stationed overseas*, Washington DC, September 23, 2004, accessed online at <http://ia600300.us.archive.org/12/items/globalposturerev00unit/globalposturerev00unit.pdf>
- 5 US Department of Defense, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Seapower*, Washington DC, October 2007, accessed online at <http://www.navy.mil/maritime/Maritimestrategy.pdf>
- 6 For a detailed examination of China's challenge to US naval supremacy, see Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes *Red star over the Pacific*, Newport, Rhode Island, Naval Institute Press, 2010

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