

Enhanced US Military Presence in Australia Directed against China

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Obama announces increased US military presence in Australia before South China Sea showdown

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and US President Barack Obama have revived their predecessors' cordial relations, announcing an historic agreement on 16 November to house 250 US Marines at the Robertson Barracks, close to Darwin. US troops posted in Australia will conduct joint exercises and training, and by 2016 their numbers are scheduled to have grown to 2500. Under the agreement American military aircraft will also make greater usage of the Tindall Air Force base (Northern WA), and have access to the Stirling naval base at Garden Island near Perth, WA. Not one to be outdone in militaristic gaff, Opposition leader Tony Abbott promised that a Coalition government led by him would establish a new joint facility on Australian soil to accompany the two existing joint facilities, Pine Gap (near Alice Springs, NT) and Kojarena (near Geraldton, WA).

The following day in his speech to the Australian parliament in Canberra, Obama stressed the common bond and values the two nations shared: "Aussies and Americans have stood together, we have fought together, we have given lives together in every single major conflict of the past hundred years." Looking to "end today's wars", he described a broader shift in US foreign policy "to make our presence and mission in Asia-Pacific a top priority...[allocating] the resources necessary to maintain a strong presence in the region." While Obama identified broad areas of trade and cooperation with Asia Pacific nations, his commitment to positive relations with China was reserved by a promise to "speak candidly to Beijing over the importance of upholding international norms and respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people." He also took aim at China's devalued currency, intellectual property standards and climate change policies.

Darwin's Best Mate?

Later that afternoon Obama flew to Darwin for a short visit, where he led an estimated 2000 troops in a chant of "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie!" Those few hours constituted the Northern Territory Police's largest ever security operation, apparently sufficient to justify the removal of the homeless population from a city park he was scheduled to visit (the president remained at the Royal Australian Air Force base throughout his stay). Immediately prior to his arrival an activist group named Darwin Residents Against War (DRAW) staged a protest near the Northern Territory parliament, denouncing the expansion of US military in Australia, the continuing war in Afghanistan and the contribution that Australian and US intelligence networks operating out of the Pine Gap facility have made to offensive attacks in the Iraq war.

A member of that group, Justin Tutty, described to me some of the social issues expected from the increased military presence, ranging from, “the anticipated conflict between the Americans and the significant local Australian Defence community, and the social problems experienced in other communities around the world where American troops have brought anti-social behaviour, ranging from alcohol and drug abuse, [to] violence and sexual assault.” Given Gillard’s recent flippancy on nuclear issues (she has now agreed to sell uranium to the Indian government, a non-signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty), Darwin residents that have long opposed hosting volatile nuclear submarines in Darwin harbour have braced themselves for an intensification of this struggle.

The economic benefits expected from this military cooperation appear, much like their renowned free trade agreement, to accrue disproportionately on the side of the US. It has recently increased arms sales throughout the Asia Pacific region, and with Australia planning to upgrade 85% of its military hardware over the next 10-15 years, a significant claim on that demand has been secured by US industry. After extensive consultation with Australian private defense firms the Defence Trade Controls Bill 2011 was recently introduced into the Australian parliament, and its passage would make it easier for Australia to purchase American defence-related goods and services. Australia’s cooperation as the only non-NATO member in the ‘F-35 Joint Striker Fighter’ programme (a multilateral investment scheme funding the construction of F-35 fighter jets), demonstrates its enduring financial commitment to the US military vision. Darwin will be rewarded for that loyalty, as the Northern Territory looks forward to a boost in the local economy, including ongoing building contracts to house the newly placed troops.

A separate complex located alongside the existing Australian barracks will be required to house the additional troops, however Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith has rejected the suggestion that an increased troop presence is tantamount to having a US base on Australian soil. Green Party leader Bob Brown has called this a, “fudge”, deriding the government for having consulted with the Chinese, Indian and Indonesian governments but failing to do the same with the Australian parliament. Nonetheless, the Indonesian government has expressed the need for an urgent explanation from Gillard at the Summit of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bali this weekend. While a recent poll by the Lowy Institute for International Policy showed that 55% of Australians would support allowing the US to base military forces in Australia, Independent Senator Nick Xenophon argued that while the Australian public may be happy with an Obama-led US military presence, that position might well be different under a more hawkish administration, such as one led by the Republican Tea Party.

Reversing Australia’s ‘Tyranny of Distance’

Obama’s invocation of the Asia Pacific focus coupled with its assertive rhetoric towards growing Chinese economic and military power illustrates a clear strategic imperative for the US. China has increasingly made claims over areas of the South China Sea, including the Spratly (Philippines) and Paracel (Vietnam) islands. The sea, which carries \$US 5 trillion in annual trade, is being brought within China’s sphere of influence. China’s mid-range missile system easily stretches as far as US bases in Japan and South Korea, hence Australian intelligence analyst Alan Dupont suggestion that Australia’s “‘tyranny of distance’ is now a distinct strategic advantage.” Professor Hugh White from the Australian National University on the other hand sees this as a risky move that will be seen in both Washington and Beijing, “as Australia aligning itself with an American strategy to contain China.”

China's unprecedented economic growth over the last decade has been coupled with an awakening political consensus that threatens Western interests. The Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a geopolitical security alliance established in 2001, whose six full members (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) account for 60% of the Eurasian land mass, and India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan are now seeking full membership. Its rising influence may serve to counterbalance the unparalleled military might of NATO, and recent events within the South China Sea indicate that this threat is being taken seriously by Washington. In July the US Navy partnered with Japanese and Australian naval forces, conducting major military exercises in areas of the South China Sea contiguous to contested areas. These exercises, as well as similar joint exercises by US and Vietnamese forces in August, pose a veiled threat to Beijing.

Disputes over sovereignty abound the region. China and the Philippines both seek control of the deepwater hydrocarbon resources in the Recto Bank (under the jurisdiction of the disputed Spratlys Islands); while the Philippines argue that the International Law of the Sea provides them the exclusive right to develop these resources, China points to a Joint Seismic Undertaking, a commercial arrangement, in support of their claim. After a recent visit to the islands, Filipino Parliamentarian Walden Bello stated that the Philippines is grappling with the realization the China is now replacing the US as the world's primary economic power. Keen to dispel such a perception and maintain an image US power throughout the region, Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton declared the dispute a matter of national importance during her visit to Manila on Tuesday. More dramatically, this declaration followed a military drill before an audience of journalists on October 27 in which hundreds of Filipino and American troops together stormed the island of Palawan, only 50 miles from the disputed Spratlys Islands. Filipino President Benigno Aquino has increased the national Coast Guard presence throughout the region, which some have begun calling the 'West Philippine Sea'.

The decision of the Vietnamese government to grant exploitation and production rights to Exxon Mobil Corp amidst a similar dispute over the Paracel Islands, between Vietnam's Danang Coast and China's Hainan island has invoked strong criticism from China. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei warned foreign companies not to enter into area's disputed by China. Vietnam's hugely expanding naval budget over the last few years reflects the economic reliance that they have placed on maintaining sovereignty over the region, and recent studies of the oil and gas wealth held beneath the sea floor rationalise this view. Optimistic Chinese estimates have placed the total amount of oil in the Spratly and Paracel Islands' jurisdiction at 105 billion barrels of the 213 billion barrels in total they claim is in the South China Sea, although US Geological Survey figures are dramatically lower.

Showdown in Bali

The Agreement for a more geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable US military presence throughout the Asia Pacific region represents a tactical maneuver regarding the growing power of China. Whether that approach constitutes a policy of inclusion or isolation will probably become clearer at the Bali Summit this weekend, where ASEAN leaders are set to debate maritime security in the South China Sea and regional economic integration. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao will face off against the omni-President Obama (who lived in Jakarta for four years until he was ten), however Beijing has already warned that the interference of the US in a dispute to which they are not a party will only sabotage peace and stability in the region.

If the key themes presented at the APEC meeting in Honolulu this week are anything to go by, the new Asian century being sold by US negotiators is all about marginalizing China through the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement, an enormous free trade agreement being negotiated between the US and 8 other Pacific countries (Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam). While Japan, South Korea, Canada and Mexico have all received recent invitations to join the party, China has, to a certain extent, been left out in the cold. Whether this isolation will continue in Bali may prove the ultimate test of Gillard's negotiating power, as her willingness to accommodate US power in the Pacific may not prove popular with the Chinese administration she currently seeks a bilateral trade agreement with.

Considering the growing proportion of US public debt owned by China, the magnitude of its import and export market and the direct sovereign control of the yuan, it is beyond question whether China will play a role in the Asian Century. China alone can decide whether there will be repercussions for the Australian and US military alliance, and China alone can assess whether Australia's importance as an energy exporter outweighs their active enhancement of US military capability in the region. Were the arrangement to foment conflict between Australia's neighbours, it is unclear whether Australia could handle the loss of trade and investment from its closest trading partners. Conflict and economic stagnation would likely compel the need for greater intervention and paradoxically increase the flow of refugees to Australia, already the topic of so much controversy. Would then the Australian government call in its favours with Washington to request more Marines to patrol their vast borders?

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