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Whither US forces? US military presence in the Asia-Pacific and the implications for Australia

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Introduction

The Australia-United States Ministerial (AUSMIN) talks next week come at a time when Australia's most important ally is reassessing its strategic policy and disposition of forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia's security has long depended upon a robust US military presence in the Western Pacific but America's pre-eminence is under challenge with the rise of China.

China is gradually eroding America's military dominance in the region and is also attempting to blunt American diplomacy. Some worry that America's economic troubles may affect its ability to compete effectively and maintain its strategic footprint in Asia. That concern is probably overstated, but there's no gainsaying that the cost of two long wars in the Middle East and a global military footprint is starting to weigh heavily on the United States.

The Pentagon is currently reviewing its global posture and a likely outcome is a substantial and long-term adjustment of America's military presence in the Western Pacific. Growing Chinese power projection capabilities are likely to see US forces seeking greater strategic depth across the region. The strategy of forward deployment of troops in Northeast Asia is no longer considered adequate to provide for stability in a changing Asia.

Washington is thus encouraging its existing allies to take a more active role in Asia-Pacific security. It is also courting other nations, especially in Southeast Asia. The South China Sea, trade routes across the Indian Ocean and the strategically critical Strait of Malacca are increasingly seen as arenas of potential competition. All of those factors have the net effect of making Australia of increasing interest to the American government as a location from which to project power in the region.

This paper analyses the options for a local US military presence and the implications for Australia. For Australia, the presence of US forces is about much more than just their physical presence. It is about declaring our strategic intent in the burgeoning Sino-US competition in the Asia-Pacific.

The China challenge

Since the end of World War II, the security order in the Asia-Pacific has largely been underpinned by a significant US forward deployed military presence. During the Cold War, US military primacy was challenged at sea

by the Soviet Pacific Fleet and on land during two major ‘proxy wars’. But since the 1990s, US naval, air, and land assets have dominated the region, reassuring allies and partners by extending deterrence and securing the freedom of the seas to allow for uninterrupted maritime trade in this economically thriving region.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, China accepted US preeminance as the basis of the regional order, if begrudgingly. Even today, China reluctantly accepts that there is no ready substitute for American power in the wider Asia-Pacific region. But when US forces were deployed in support of Taiwan during the Strait crisis of 1995–96, effectively intervening in what Beijing sees as internal Chinese affairs, the writing was on the wall for Chinese acquiescence to uncontested American leadership.

To that end, funded by its economic success, China has embarked on a modernisation of its armed forces, particularly its naval and air capabilities. The People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) investment in capabilities such as anti-satellite weapons, strike aircraft, submarines, medium-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles and sea mines means that China is ratcheting up the potential cost to US forces of any intervention in the region.

China will be able to challenge the United States locally well before it can pose a real military threat globally.[1] The PLA’s immediate goal is to deny the approaches to China to external forces in what it calls the ‘First Island Chain’. Capabilities being fielded today are able to target major US bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam, as well as threatening key mobile targets such as aircraft carriers. As the figure below (from the 2011 Pentagon assessment of Chinese military power) demonstrates, China’s conventional land-based cruise and ballistic missiles are now able to strike targets in the entire South China Sea and most of the Western Pacific, including the US territory of Guam.[2] Even large parts of Indonesia are now theoretically within reach.

Figure 1. Chinese land-based ballistic and cruise missile ranges

Source: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2011

America's response

The United States has to decide how to react to the China challenge, and the choices made will shape the American military presence in the Western Pacific. Some strategists question America's political resolve to put their forward deployed troops at risk in the face of growing Chinese power. This could imply future relocations of some of the troops currently in Japan and Korea to beyond PLA missile range and an increased reliance on the threat of conventional precision-strikes against China itself from afar as a means of deterrence. Such an 'offshore balancing' strategy would amount to the US acceding to Chinese demands to keep out of what Beijing regards as its 'sphere of influence', particularly Taiwan and the South China Sea.

However, recent developments in US strategic policy suggest that America has every intention of maintaining its position in the Asia-Pacific, including through the use of forward deployed forces. As Secretary of State Clinton made clear in her Hawaii Speech of October 2010, US strategic interests as a 'Pacific power' are too important to consider disengagement. Instead, she asserted that the US was now 'back in Asia' and is willing to reassure allies and partners about its commitment to provide for regional stability.[3]

Earlier she rebuffed claims by the Chinese military of 'undisputable sovereignty' in the South China Sea. This message was meant for America's allies and partners who, seeking closer security engagement with the US as a means to 'hedge' against China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, had called for a greater American engagement in the region. This will enable the United States to recruit support for its role as primary security guarantor. China has been unable to provide an attractive alternative model—in fact its behaviour in recent years has been counterproductive.[4]

As ASPI noted in its recent analysis of China's Defence White Paper 2010 and America's latest Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the two militaries are already in competition.[5] Consistent with this trend, senior US defence officials have become more outspoken in criticising Chinese military developments. Commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), Admiral Robert F Willard, recently highlighted the increasing threat Chinese area denial capabilities posed to US freedom of manoeuvre.[6] Willard's policy prescription was a strengthened military presence in the region and a more integrated approach with allies and partners, an approach later echoed by then Secretary of Defense Robert M Gates.

It's unlikely that the United States will move all of its forces outside the range of these Chinese weapons—there's a trade-off between the safety that comes with distance and the ability to respond to sudden developments or even to maintain a presence. While moving further away increases the warning time of any attack, it reduces the ability to hit back quickly and begins to eat into platform endurance—especially of airborne assets. The credibility of extended deterrence depends on physical presence, even if within striking distance of the potential enemy. During the Cold War, the US had significant forces deployed in Western Europe that would have suffered terrible losses in a Soviet first strike. This point was recently reinforced by US Air Force Secretary Michael B Donley: '… our view is that the development of Chinese anti-access and [area] denial capabilities has to be confronted as a strategic fact of life. But it does not have to be acceded to. It's not something that would cause us to walk away from fundamental interests. It's just a new factor in terms of the development of new technologies and capabilities by other actors in the region which we need to… respond [to] appropriately.'[7]

The US will thus likely maintain its strong presence in Japan and South Korea. Japan is particularly sensitive to China's rise and would be alarmed by any peremptory American withdrawal. Instead, the US will likely harden bases there and may integrate its forces even more tightly with the Japanese Self-Defense

Force (JSDF). The American presence in South Korea is still primarily configured to deter a North Korean aggression but will likely see increased efforts to make forces available for contingencies beyond the Peninsula. As well, the base at Guam will be hardened against missile attack, and will continue to host long-range strike aircraft and some 8,000 Marines relocated from Okinawa.

Long-range strike plays an important part in the developing American ‘Air-Sea Battle’ doctrine described broadly in the 2010 QDR.[8] Details of the strategy are classified but the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), a US think tank with very close connection to the American military, has published a major report on the concept. According to them, Air-Sea Battle is specifically designed to deter and if necessary defeat Chinese attempts to deny the US access to the Western Pacific theatre. Apart from hardened bases in Northeast Asia, it relies on credibly threatening to strike critical military targets deep within Chinese territory from afar and on defeating PLA air and sea forces in a sustained conventional campaign. It also proposes to impose a distant blockade on China in the event of war. Importantly, the concept foresees a tight integration of key allies with a concomitant greater rate of effort on their behalf— the authors of the study explicitly mention Japan and Australia in this context.[9]

From a purely military perspective, some analysts have already raised a number of critical questions, including how nuclear conflict could be prevented if China was faced with crippling conventional strikes against its command and control infrastructure.[10] But even without concerns of nuclear escalation, from the point of view of Australia, which would prefer a peaceful coexistence between its major ally and largest trading partner, there’s much to worry about in this picture.

‘Air-Sea Battle’ is a clear expression of plans for a future military engagement of Chinese forces should the situation deteriorate to that point. Because the concept involves a close integration of key allies and partners, it effectively requires them to choose sides. Combined with a more flexible US military presence in the Asia-Pacific, America’s allies will be faced with some hard strategic choices, not only with regard to the provision of bases for US forces and deeper integration with them, but about their alliance commitments. This will make politically reliable allies and partners particularly important for the US, as others might not want to commit themselves to making a strategic choice between Washington and Beijing. Allies and partners will thus need to educate themselves about the nature of the new concept to avoid being confronted with a ‘fait accompli’.

A diversified US posture

Apart from modifying its force posture in Northeast Asia, the US will aim to diversify its presence in the Asia-Pacific. Then Defense Secretary Gates, speaking at the recent Shangri-La dialogue, flagged a ‘defence posture across the Asia-Pacific that is more geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable—a posture that maintains our presence in Northeast Asia while enhancing our presence in Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean’.[11]

In Southeast Asia, as part of its strategy of co-opting regional partners, the United States may look to negotiate some form of access to locations in the Philippines and in Vietnam. Some historical issues would need to be worked through with either; the 1990s expulsion of US forces from its bases in the Philippines continues to make American planners hesitant, and the Vietnam War was only a generation ago. But nervousness in Manila and Hanoi about increased Chinese capabilities and assertiveness means that what seemed unlikely a decade ago is increasingly plausible. Singapore will also be central to US strategic posture in the region. It has not only been a reliable ‘de facto ally’ of the United States but its location at the Southernmost edge of the South China Sea and near the strategically vital Strait of Malacca would allow relatively small forces to have a disproportionate effect.

The US will probably also view the Indian Ocean as a more important area for military activity given its growing importance as a trade and energy conduit. In combination with a growing Indian naval capability, the US will want to be able to dominate the seas in this region and to counter Chinese attempts to establish a major presence there. Despite some hesitancy, India seems to be warming towards deeper military cooperation with the United States, driven in no small part by Chinese activity in neighbouring Pakistan. The United States base on Diego Garcia, which it leases from the United Kingdom, allows it to project power in the Indian Ocean.[12] But Diego Garcia is a long way from the South China Sea and the sea lanes threading the Indonesian archipelago. That's where Australia starts to enter the picture.

What might an American presence in Australia look like?

American interest in Australia as a host of US forces and the fact that the Australian Government is favourably disposed towards the idea is on the record. PACOM's Admiral Willard identified Australia as a particularly steadfast ally and noted Australia's interest 'in doing more to facilitate USPACOM regional posture'. He added that the United States and Australia are considering forms of access, supply support, joint training, and rotational presence.

There are essentially two options for increasing the footprint of American forces in Australia; through the permanent basing of American force elements or through standing agreements that allow access to Australian facilities and support arrangements that allow ships, aircraft and personnel to deploy temporarily for operations in our near region. Willard's reference to a 'rotational presence' seems to point towards the latter. Similarly, Defence Minister Stephen Smith recently detailed the options under active discussion: options for increased US access to Australian training, exercise and test ranges, the prepositioning of US equipment in Australia and greater use by the US of Australian facilities and ports.[13]

Geography allows us to deduce which US force elements are likely to come our way. Australia isn't likely to feature heavily in American plans for operations in North Asia—it is only a couple of days sailing closer to North Asia than the major American base in Hawaii. Pearl Harbour can be used as a staging point for operations further west with no complicating sovereignty issues or new fixed costs to be managed. (See Table 1 for distances from prospective bases to the Taiwan Strait.)

Table 1: Distances from past, current or potential US bases to the Taiwan Strait

	Distance (nm)	Transit time @ 20 kts (days)
Okinawa (Japan)	225	0.5
Subic Bay (Philippines)	613	1.3
Guam (US)	1,565	3.3
Singapore	1,700	3.5
Darwin (Australia)	2,320	4.8
Fremantle (Australia)	3,510	7.3
Hawaii (US)	4,590	9.6

An enhanced US presence in the Southeast Asian region would be more about building confidence in American longevity in the region than any immediate thought of combat operations—although that would necessarily be a possibility in some circumstances. Naval assets based in Australia, especially in the north of the continent, would be proximate to shipping lanes through the Indonesian archipelago and in the Southwest Pacific, which is particularly attractive should the US choose

to impose a distant blockade against China in the Malacca or the Lombok straits—a critical component of the Air-Sea Battle concept. Assets based on Australia's west coast would have easy access to the eastern part of the Indian Ocean.

For air assets, even mainland Australian bases are a little far away for maintaining a presence or projecting power over the key regions of Southeast Asia or the Indian Ocean. But Australia's offshore territories at Christmas and Cocos islands in the Indian Ocean could provide a suitable forward staging base for American aircraft.

So it's most likely that the forces deployed from Australia will be elements of the US Pacific and Indian Ocean fleets and maritime patrol aircraft, operating from Darwin, the west coast (probably Fremantle) and possibly from offshore territories. Given the air and maritime focus that is the main driver of these developments, the US Army isn't likely to feature heavily.

However, given the tight integration of the United States Navy and Marine Corps (USMC), it's conceivable that the Marines could be part of the picture. And there are certainly plausible scenarios that the Marines could contribute to—while not deployed in the INTERFET East Timor operation in 1999, the 'over the horizon' presence of a USMC expeditionary unit would certainly have played a role in shaping thinking in Jakarta. However, the garrisoning of large numbers of Marines in Australia would present a more complex set of management and political issues. Unlike platforms that fly or sail in and out again, the housing of personnel has a much more dramatic impact on local communities. For that reason, that might prove to be a step too far at present.

Issues to be balanced

The establishment of permanent American bases would raise local sovereignty issues and would potentially be politically contentious—as they have been at times in the Philippines, Japan and Korea. The likely rotational nature of an increased American presence would help ameliorate such concerns.

But *any* basing—permanent or rotational—of American warships, aircraft or personnel in Australia could cause difficulties for a future Australian government. If the United States committed those forces to military activities that Australia judged to not be in its own interests, Australia would nonetheless be making a very visible contribution to those operations. In the case of American operations against Chinese interests, that would make very explicit the choosing of sides referred to earlier.

However, the extent to which that matters is debateable. Australia already hosts joint Australian–American facilities that constitute an important part of American intelligence gathering and command and control networks. Any operations in the Asia-Pacific region are likely to rely on those facilities for their effectiveness in any case—and they will present themselves as targets to any adversary for that reason.

At the time Australia agreed to host joint facilities, there was no notion of taking sides between the United States and China—the adversary was very much the Soviet Union, to which Australia had no particularly strong links of any kind. Australia could side with the United States and gain a considerable security benefit with little downside risk. Today there is a new calculus and the potential downsides are higher than they were in the Cold War.

Yet, despite this, Australian strategic decision-makers remain firmly committed to the ANZUS alliance because it continues to serve this country's strategic interests and also reflects a deeply rooted identification with its US ally.[14] Australia is thus already in the American camp and the debate about increasing the US military footprint in Australia is really about increasing a pre-existing commitment. And Australia already routinely hosts visits from US warships, deployments of US

aircraft and participates in joint exercises—all as part of an enduring and robust alliance relationship. The policy challenge for the Australian Government today is to balance the positives that would come with a continued or increased American presence—there is no serious appetite within the Australian polity for *reducing* the existing presence—against the potential downsides.

And the positives are substantial. Having US forces regularly present at Australian ports and airfields will provide a level of conventional deterrence that's well beyond what the Australian Defence Force can generate on its own. In many ways the Royal Australian Navy is a lighter version of the US Navy—we have frigates and submarines and will have three destroyers in years to come, but we lack the aircraft carriers that provide the power projection and strike capabilities that America has spent decades generating. While China is making inroads into American military power within the two island chains of North Asia, there's no real prospect of anyone meaningfully challenging the United States on the wider Pacific stage in the near future.

As well, there is a quid pro quo for Australia further entrenching itself in the regional coalition the United States is setting out to build. While it involves Australia reinforcing its earlier choice, a tighter engagement with Australia would make it difficult for the US not to support Australia in any local military operations. The capabilities the United States can bring to the party would provide a huge boost to Australia's own capability at little financial cost.

Conversely, Australia might also find it harder to resist requests from Washington to be involved in military operations. But again that's really a continuation of the existing Australian approach anyway—with the exception of those few operations such as in Kosovo or Libya which were conducted under NATO auspices, Australia has contributed to every substantial conflict that America has been involved in since 1941.

Finally, there's been a tendency in the past for Australia's neighbours to regard its alliance with the United States with suspicion—to view Canberra's foreign policy as subservient to that of Washington. Today that's much less of an issue due to increased uneasiness about the rise of China. Australia's tight security relationship with the United States is increasingly a positive that can be used to build such relationships around the region. By doing so, we would hope to help build structures that make conflict between the United States and China less, rather than more, likely.

Conclusion

As far as its position of primary military and diplomatic power in the Asia-Pacific is concerned, the United States has made a decision that it will not respond to rising Chinese power by going gently into the good night. Instead, it is working to build new relationships throughout the Asia-Pacific region and to reinvigorate its presence in the Western Pacific and Indian oceans.

The military competition between the two powers that is already underway will present the countries of the region with a choice—they can either try to find a way through the changing power balance while remaining detached from it, or they can effectively choose a side. The Pentagon's emerging Air-Sea Battle concept may make that choice starker.

Australia's geographic position provides some separation from potential points of dispute in North Asia. But America's strategies of increased regional engagement and defence in depth makes it an attractive location for American forces, sitting as it does at the crossroads between the Pacific and Indian oceans and within range of Southeast Asia.

But it's not accurate to describe any future decisions to host American forces as Australia having to choose between China and the United States. Australia's continued commitment to the ANZUS alliance means that this decision has effectively already been made.

Any increase in the local American presence will probably result in some diplomatic and possibly other repechages from China but it won't change the fundamentals of the situation. Australia is firmly in the American camp as part of the ANZUS alliance whether American naval and other forces stage out of Australia or not.

Endnotes

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