

# Back to the Bases

*Richard Tanter*

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## US-Australia defence ties have been building for a decade: do Australians know how far we are committed?

When Barack Obama visited Australia in November 2011, he and Julia Gillard announced a new level of military cooperation between the United States and Australia. The public centre-piece of the ‘announceables’ from Obama’s visit was the planned deployment of a US Marine Air–Ground Task Force (MAGTF) to Darwin. Less attention was paid to the second part of the Obama–Gillard announcement describing more use of Australian air bases by US aircraft: more visits, more frequently, by a wider range of aircraft. No detail was provided as to which aircraft or which bases, but already US strategic B-52 and B-2 bombers based in Guam and the United States practise long-range bombing at the huge ADF (Australian Defence Force) Delamere Weapons Range in the Northern Territory. Subsequently, possible new roles for Australian facilities at HMAS Stirling in Perth and the Cocos–Keeling islands emerged in media reports.

The Australian and US government spokespeople were careful to insist that no solely US bases were being established, and that US personnel would only be rotating through Australian bases, albeit from the US side a ‘constant rotation’. This particularly applies to Robertson Barracks in Darwin, which is already home to 4500 ADF personnel after extensive upgrading, and is to be expanded for half as many US forces again.

Yet, as politically important as the Marines deployment is as a highly visible US and Australian statement of intent to forestall the influence of China’s increasing military posture in the region, it is far less so militarily. The latter is hardly negligible, but it cannot be compared to the quiet but extraordinary growth in Australia–US military and intelligence cooperation over the last decade, which has led to a largely unnoticed, regular series of announcements at the annual Australia–US Ministerial (AUSMIN) meetings of defence and foreign ministers.

At AUSMIN 2008 and 2010 new joint facilities were announced at the Naval Communications Station Harold E. Holt at North West Cape, and in 2007 at the Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station at Kojarena near Geraldton. New or increased US access to a number of existing facilities had been announced earlier: the Bradshaw Field Training Area (2004) and the Delamere Air Weapons Range (2005) and Shoalwater Bay (2004) in the Northern Territory, the Joint Combined Training Centre (2004), and the Yampi Sound Training Area north-west of Derby, Western Australia.

In parallel, while not discussed in this article about new joint facilities, new operational capacities at the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap outside Alice Springs, which brought the work of that facility to the front line in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and which, together with a new US space surveillance radar planned for North West Cape, have cemented Australia’s role in US missile defence and space operations. (For reasons of space, the complex developments are not addressed in this article. For a short version of the argument, see Richard Tanter, ‘Pine Gap and the coalition wars in Afghanistan and Iraq’, Christians Against ALL Terrorism, Alice Springs, 13 June 2007, at <nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Alice-meeting.ppt>.)

In late March 2012 HMAS Stirling at Perth, the only major naval facility on the west coast of Australia, was reported to be under discussion, as was access of US Air Force Global Hawk to the airfield on the West Island of the Cocos–Keeling group in the Indian Ocean south of Java. The Australian government has foreshadowed an increase in the number, frequency and type of US naval visits to HMAS Stirling, but unlike the case of the northern facilities, few details have been announced. Following media reports of the Global Hawk deployment to the Cocos Islands, the Australian government maintained that although the matter was under discussion, no decisions had been taken.

### After the Bush Debacle: Rebalancing US Strategy around the Asia Pivot

There are two key elements in the strategic background to the United States’ heightened military and intelligence access to Australian facilities. The first is the Obama administration’s efforts to rebalance US global power away from the disasters of the Bush administration’s wars of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan around the ‘Asia pivot’. As Assistant Secretary of the US Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Williams said before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in October 2011:

From day one of this Administration, we have employed a multifaceted strategy to articulate a vision and chart a pathway to

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Back to the Bases

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04 2012–05 2012

Nº 117

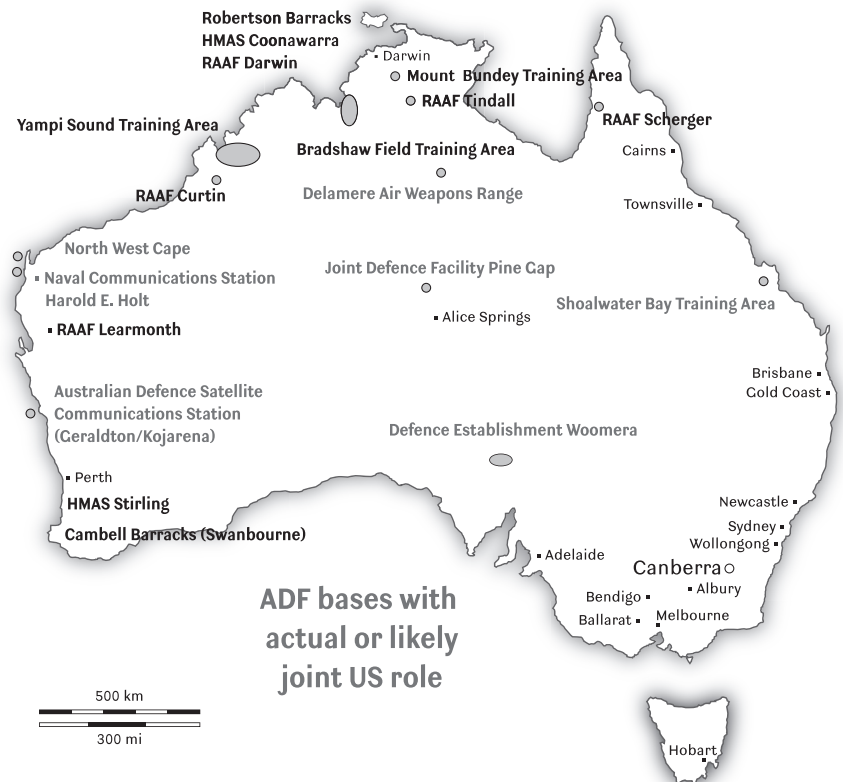
realize the Asia pivot in American foreign policy ... As the long shadow of 9/11 recedes, we are witnessing the re-emergence of the Asia-Pacific as a key theater of global politics and economics. ... As Asia rises, so too must America's role in it.

'For starters', Hilary Clinton confirms, this involves six elements of 'a forward deployed diplomacy' to deal with 'the rapid and dramatic shifts playing out across Asia':

- strengthening bilateral security alliances;
- deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China;
- engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.

A precursor and foundation to this 'rebalancing' had in fact already begun under the Bush administration with a 'strategic partnership' between India and the United States in 2004, followed by nuclear energy and arms cooperation agreements the following year. But the Obama military, political and economic strategy is much more comprehensive, and more clearly marked by retreats from Iraq and Afghanistan, albeit still far from complete. The strategic core concerns the long-running ambivalence about China in US ruling circles: is China to be the United States' new global strategic partner in a positive-sum global game, as seemed to be preferred under the Clinton administration, or will it be, as in the Bush administration's early preference, a strategic competitor?

The issue is still by no means clear, with Obama pursuing close dialogue with China on many issues—in fact most unusually the two presidents met face to face eight times in the twenty-four months to January 2011. Yet at the same time, US military strategy, with enthusiastic Australian and Japanese support, has increasingly emphasised a robust realignment of US and allied forces to the east and south of China, and in the Indian Ocean, with control of sea lanes a clear concern. Containment, a term redolent of Cold War rejection of dialogue and shared interests, may be too strong a word to use in this context, but the United States is going far beyond mere hedging on its future options. US hegemony in East and Southeast Asia has been based in the system of power and rules built on the victory of 1945, nuclear alliances, and the 1972 accord between Nixon and Mao that allowed China to take the path of export-led industrialisation into the US-controlled regime of world trade. But this arrangement has begun to dissolve as allied elites question American political resolve and military capacity, and as Chinese elites increasingly decide to challenge US domination of the writing of the rules of global capitalism and security practices.



Whether the Obama Asia pivot can revitalise US hegemony in Asia through global military reorganisation and modernisation, strengthened bilateral alliances, new multilateral institutions like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and restructured political and economic relationships with former Cold War outliers like India and Vietnam, remains to be seen. But certainly security issues are now front and centre for the US relationship with China, with the shadow of a revived containment policy not far off stage.

A key part of this, as Hilary Clinton and Kurt Campbell foreshadowed, is increased military cooperation not only with Australia, but also with Singapore, which for the first time will be the home port for four US Navy warships, and the Philippines, where the United States is seeking to restore close military ties and basing rights. (These were lost decades ago following intense political pressure by Philippines civil society groups following the United States' long-running support for the Marcos dictatorship.)

### The Australian Strategic Background

In all of this, Australian policy is fraught. Everyone knows of the contradiction between sixty years of security ties to the United States and Australia's deep, asymmetrical trade interdependence with China, asymmetrical because while there are other potential quarries in the world, even Japan and Korea cannot replace China as an Australian resources customer.

Various strategic developments are relevant here. The first is the deepening integration of the ADF with the armed forces of the United States, Japan and NATO (the latter themselves the subject of ever closer integration with the United States). The 2007 Australia–Japan Security Cooperation Declaration and the NATO formal partnership with Australia buttress the bilateral AUSMIN-auspiced developments.

This integration is organisational, operational and material. The AUSMIN process has provided the institutional framework for bilateral working groups of officials and military, focusing on the mantra of 'interoperability', with implications for organisational culture, standard operating procedures, weapons systems, logistics compatibility and shared operational practices in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2006 the Defence Department made clear the areas of priority for

further developing ‘the highest levels’ of ADF and intelligence interoperability with the United States:

- Joint Battlespace Management, Command and Control.
- Combat identification and common operating picture. Collaboration is imperative to ensure Australia is protected from friendly-fire incidents when operating with the United States or as part of a combined US force.
- Communications and information systems. There are currently some differences in tactical communications capability between Australian and US ground forces. Projects are being progressed to ensure fully compatible communications systems are procured for the land forces.
- High-end warfighting capabilities (major ships, armoured vehicles, air combat assets).
- Intelligence exchange.

Most of these areas of interoperability turn out to involve the ADF bases to which the United States has gained increased access over the past decade—that is, what are in reality ‘joint facilities’, whatever the official tag.

The strategic effects of this growing operational, organisational and material impetus to global allied integration were confirmed and amplified by the 2009 Defence White Paper *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, widely recognised as the most incoherent, belligerent and incompetent white paper in a generation. Three aspects of it are salient. First, it was framed around an overt and blunt identification of China as a potential threat (the corresponding Japanese white paper was explicit on the same theme). Second, the medium-term strategic environment was characterised by a decline in US regional primacy. Third, the basic principles of Australian defence planning presented in the paper were an unworked-through hodge-podge of the work of an earlier era—the Dibb/Beazley ‘Defence of Australia’ doctrine, based on a set of concentric circles of decreasing strategic significance around Australia, and retention and reiteration of Howard-era niche expeditionary roles for the ADF in UniteUS-led global coalitions.

Taken together, the result of these policy and force structure changes may well be that, from a Chinese perspective, Australia is not so much *hosting* US military bases, as *becoming* a virtual US base itself. That may be a little strong, but almost a decade of continuous developments in joint Australia–US defence facilities and new levels of US access to Australian facilities undoubtedly profoundly change Australia’s strategic situation, and how we are viewed globally.

One issue that needs close examination is the extent to which these still ongoing developments are the result of US pressure on its Australian ally, or rather, as was the case in the Vietnam war, of Australian governments seeking to deepen the involvement of the United States in the region and increase their perceived utility to it by anticipating US needs and taking the initiative by offering the facilities first. It is not possible yet to make such a judgement in the contemporary case, but a hint of Australian bureaucratic and strategic activism was suggested by a comment in *The Australian* that ‘Australia might have been encouraging the US to increase its

military presence’, after the remark to the *Washington Post* by the US Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, that ‘It’s fair to say that we will always take an interest in what the Australians are doing and want to do’.

### The New Joint Facilities

#### *Darwin and the Marine Air–Ground Task Force*

For the US Marine Corps, the smallest and politically weakest of the US armed services, the Darwin deployment is a mixed outcome. There has long been political and operational urgency to moving the Marines from the main island of Okinawa—their presence there being hugely contentious because of their social and environmental impact. Militarily, for the most part, Okinawa and Guam are poor locations for Middle Eastern, Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian operations. The Marines had been hoping the Asia pivot strategy would lead to basing in Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, or in Thailand. Strategically, Darwin is second best. On the other hand, the political significance and visibility of the Darwin deployment means that the Marine Corps can look for some budgetary protection in the face of the Obama administration’s plan to cut US\$500 billion from the military budget over the next ten years.

The first 150 of the Marine Air–Ground Task Force (MAGTF) arrived in Darwin in March 2012, and the full complement of 2500 is expected to be in place by 2016. When complete the Task Force will consist of command, ground combat and air combat elements available for rapid deployment for expeditionary combat. Despite Australian government gainsaying, the Robertson Barracks deployment will effectively be a permanent joint base, with the organisational heart of the Task Force retained at Robertson as 2500 Marines on ‘constant rotation’ pass through, probably on six month tours.

Second best though it is, Darwin is an attractive location for the Marines. RAAF Darwin is co-located with Darwin International Airport. The port of Darwin, already the busiest naval port in the country, can take ships with a draft of up to 12 m—at a stretch enough even for the largest US aircraft carriers—and East Arm Wharf has a good-sized POL (petroleum–oil–lubricants) pier for Marine logistics requirements. The NT government is eager for more defence spending, which already makes up 12.6 per cent of the Territory’s gross state product.

#### *The Joint Networked Range: Bradshaw, Delamere and Mount Bunday*

The three main training locations for the MAGTF will be the Bradshaw Field Training Area, the Mount Bunday Training Area near Humpty Doo, and the Delamere Air Weapons Range, 220 kms south-west of Katherine. Together they make up the ADF’s North



Back to the Bases

Richard Tanter



04 2012–05 2012

Nº 117

Australian Range Complex (NARC). With Shoalwater Bay in Queensland, they are key locations for the multinational Talisman Sabre exercises.

At AUSMIN 2004 Bradshaw was designated, along with Delamere, as part of a Joint Australia–US Combat Training Centre. At 8700 sq kms, the former cattle station is just a little smaller than Cyprus, and vastly bigger than any other training range available to US Marines in the western Pacific. As part of Talisman Sabre in 2007, US and Australian personnel constructed an Assault Landing Zone airfield at Bradshaw in just four weeks as a test of the Joint Rapid Airfield Construction concept. With a 1250 m runway, it is capable of taking the largest US and Australian cargo aircraft, the 120 tonne C-17 Globemasters. The NT government's investment arm anticipates '7000 troops visiting [Bradshaw] every dry season'.

Delamere Air Weapons Range is the RAAF's principal bombing practice and testing range, more than 3000 square kms in size. Japan-based US Marine fighter aircraft have been using Delamere in exercises for many years, with an F/A-18 crashing in mysterious circumstances in 2004, and another damaged a year later. Since at least 2005, US Air Force B-52 and B-2 bombers based in Guam have repeatedly used the Delamere range.

The true significance of US access to these training ranges is not just their size and the consequent comparative freedom of action compared with Japanese and Marshall Island ranges, but the high level of instrumentation and electronic networking with other ranges and with US and Australian command and training centres. Outlining the concept of the Joint Combat Training Centre (JCTC) to a parliamentary inquiry into Australia's Defence Relations with the United States in 2006, the Defence Department made clear the truly joint, networked character and role of Delamere, Bradshaw and Mount Bunday as newly joint facilities:

A mature JCTC should not be seen as a test range or even a series of ranges. The JCTC should function as a training system that links training management systems, training areas, simulations, headquarters and units. It is proposed that the JCTC should be linked to the US Pacific Command's Pacific Warfighting Center and the US Joint Force Command's Joint National Training Capability as part of the US Global Joint Training Infrastructure.

*North West Cape—Talking to Submarines and Stalking Satellites*

The Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt at North West Cape, which was originally a US-only facility, then a joint station and, with the end of the Cold War, an Australian-

controlled facility, has returned to a primarily US war-fighting role with a vengeance, by two distinct pathways.

The first leads from US concern to retain naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia. North West Cape's original function was communication with submerged US nuclear missile submarines. Australia took effective control of the station in 1992 and has used the facility to communicate with its own submarines ever since. US submarine-launched ballistic missiles had developed longer ranges some time before, making reliance on missile submarine access to the Indian Ocean less crucial. Until that point, however, Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt would have been a high priority Soviet nuclear target.

Today the main US concern is communication with US attack submarines.

North West Cape's return to 'joint' status formally began at AUSMIN 2008, with Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon and Secretary of Defence Gates signing the Harold E. Holt Treaty. The treaty required Australia to operate a naval communications station, allowed the United States 'all necessary rights of access to and use of the station', and split the costs between the two.

The most important aspect of the emphatic US return to this VLF (very low frequency) communications base, given that it had retained access to three of the four communication channels at the facility (with the RAN having the remaining one) was, as Greens Senator Scott Ludlam put it, that

North West Cape continues to facilitate, enable and support nuclear armed submarines, offensive attack weapons platforms, thereby legitimising the retention and deployment of nuclear weapons.

The second and quite new pathway derives from Australia's decision to support the United States' quest for military dominance in space. Through a new Space Situational Awareness (SSA) Partnership signed in 2010, the United States intends to establish a powerful space surveillance sensor in Western Australia, preferably at North West Cape. This will be part of the US global Space Surveillance Network (SSN), which will have two principal functions. The first, emphasised by the Australian government, is to provide a global public good through detection and location of the large volume of space debris orbiting the earth and threatening to damage the satellites on which our networked society depends. However, the SSN has another and equally, if not more important role, for the US military, which is to use the same capacities to detect objects in space for offensive and defensive aspects of war-fighting in space.

'Space junk' in increasingly congested—and contested—space is a genuine and serious problem. Accidental and intentional breaking up of space vehicles has created tens of thousands of long-lasting objects orbiting in the regions most used by satellites, most of which are fragile, and vulnerable to collisions with even very small particles. According to Project Ploughshares and the Space Security Project,

Because of orbital velocities of up to 7.8 km per second (~30,000 km per hour) in Low Earth Orbit (LEO), debris as small as 10 cm in diameter carries the kinetic energy of a 35,000-kg truck travelling at up to 190 km per hour.

Although well buried, there was a hint that SSA has more than an interest in the global public good of cleaning up the space environment. Australia welcomed, it said, 'space arms control measures that are equitable, verifiable and in the national interest of the United States and its allies' and pledged to work with the United States towards 'transparency and confidence-building measures for enhanced stability and safety in space activities'. The fact sheet containing this recognition noted that the recipient of the data from radar and optical sensors is the (US) Joint Space Operations Center (JSpOC), which manages the US Space Surveillance Network at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

What the Australian government did not say is that JSpOC’s role is to support the mission of the Joint Functional Component Command for Space within US Strategic Command, which, to quote Christopher King and co-researchers, ‘is ... when directed, to deny the benefits of space to adversaries’. JSpOC itself is to provide ‘continuous C2 [command and control] capabilities to conduct space operations’.

The North West Cape sensor will be part of a new Space Fence made up of US Air Force-operated S-band (2-4 GHz) phased array radars, located, depending on budget, at either Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific or Ascension Island in the south Atlantic, or both.

**Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station, Kojarena,**

The Australian Defence Satellite Communications Ground Station (ADSCGS) is located at Kojarena, 30 km east of Geraldton in Western Australia. It is operated by the ADF Defence Signals Division (DSD). As of November 2005, the base was staffed by seventy-nine personnel, and housed five radomes and eight satellite antennas. The Kojarena station is a major Australian DSD signals interception facility, and is part of a worldwide system of satellite communications keyword monitoring known as Echelon, which operates within the wider UKUSA signals intelligence system.

Under an agreement initiated in 2007, Geraldton figures in the US–Australia partnership in the Wideband Global SATCOM system, which provides Australian access to the principally US-funded constellation of at least seven (and possibly nine) high-capacity global war-fighting communications satellites. Under the agreement, Australia funded the sixth satellite, due to be launched in 2012–13. The first three satellites were launched between 2007 and 2010, and Australia gained operational access by June 2010.

In November 2007 the Australian government announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States (MUOS) for the building of an additional but separate facility within the grounds of the ADSCGS. This is to consist of three small buildings, three 19 metre antennas, and two smaller antennas, making up a joint US–Australian ground station for the US Department of Defense Mobile User Objective System, a narrow-band networked satellite constellation for Ultra-High-Frequency satellite communications enabling secure all-weather and all-terrain 3-G mobile telecommunications.

The Kojarena MUOS facility will be one of four MUOS ground stations, with the others being located in Niscemi, Sicily, Virginia and Wahiawa, Hawaii.



This brief review of new joint facilities is necessarily incomplete, and does not discuss changes in the capacities and operations of the longstanding and most important joint facility of all at Pine Gap.

There is much that is troubling about these developments. Most disturbing is the lack of public discussion and detailed analysis of the implications of these new military arrangements for security—in the Australian national interest and the broader human interest. The reasons for this are not clear. Lack of information is not the answer: Australian media have reported most of these developments prominently, if not in depth. A great deal of informative and detailed background material is easily found by anyone who looks. In fact the problem is often a matter of being swamped by data and analysis. The usual reasons why Australian academic researchers are AWOL on these issues—the risk of damage to career prospects, disinterest in or aversion to ‘technology matters’, preoccupation with downstream theoretical questions, or the unfashionable status of ‘mere empiricism’—does not entirely explain things either.

Perhaps, as with wider Australian resignation to the inevitable horrors of co-auspecting the war in Afghanistan, there is some sense that, when it comes to the US alliance, there is simply nothing that can be done. So brazen is the government’s willing subordination, and so powerful the ally, that serious discussion of the operations and consequences of the alliance seems utterly futile. More dismayingly, perhaps both security practitioners and their would-be critics share a notion of Australia as inseparable from the US alliance. Alternatives it seems, analytically as much as politically, are just unthinkable. If any of this is close to true, we are all in for serious trouble. **a**

For a fully footnoted version see: <<http://nautilus.org/about/associates/richard-tanter/>>

Despite much commentary, there is remarkably little sustained and informed discussion of Australian strategic options. The most important recent reflection remains Hugh White’s 2010 *Quarterly Essay*, ‘Power Shift: Australia’s Future between Washington and Beijing’. Prior to that, three key contributions still relevant were the *Review of Australia’s Defence Capabilities* (the 1986 ‘Dibb report’, reflecting earlier conceptual work by Paul Dibb, Desmond Ball, J.O.L. Langtry, and Kim Beazley); Ball’s own highly condensed argument in his ‘The Strategic Essence’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55(2), 2001; and David Martin’s maverick but central 1984 contribution, *Armed Neutrality for Australia*.



Back to the Bases

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