

EXPAND ALLIED FORCE POSTURE INITIATIVES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Context and background

Australia and the United States should launch a new generation of Indo-Pacific posture initiatives. Drawing on the 2020 Force Posture Working Group, the establishment of new facilities, operating locations and sustainment hubs will enable a more forward Australian Defence Force (ADF) posture. This would provide options for a range of regional deterrence and defence activities, and help sustain US military presence in the Indo-Pacific. New US or allied posture initiatives in Australia and the region should focus on maintaining and expanding operational access to Southeast Asia, enabling enhanced capacity building and support for vulnerable regional states, and underwriting deterrence missions.

Realigning each country's regional force posture has been a major focus for Australia and the United States over the past decade. Canberra has upgraded military infrastructure and presence across northern Australia in an attempt to grow the capacity and capability of the ADF to surge forward in a conflict.^{10.1} Results have been mixed. While upgrades to military facilities above the 26° South parallel have proceeded in the intervening years, the overall number of ADF personnel has declined.^{10.2} Similarly, the Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia," launched in 2011, has proceeded with a highly questionable level of progress. Its aim was to achieve a

military footprint that was "geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable."^{10.3} Some significant realignments commenced and are still underway, but overall progress has been stilted, with US forces in the region operating from large concentrated bases much as they were in 2011.^{10.4}

The Biden administration

There is broad bipartisan recognition in the United States that its Indo-Pacific force posture is ill-equipped to meet China's military challenge. This includes members of Biden's national security and defence teams, many of whom have supported ongoing efforts to redistribute US forces, reinvigorate existing initiatives and forge new ones. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin supports the continued redistribution of US forces across the Indo-Pacific, including the major realignments initiated under Obama's rebalance.^{10.5} But American thinking about allied force posture initiatives – and how US infrastructure and access in the region can be leveraged to bolster allied reach and capacity – has been more limited. Some ideas have included Australia rotating naval assets to a standing maritime task force or progressing the networking of exercise and test ranges to enable integration.^{10.6} The Biden administration has inherited a long-running Joint Force effort to develop new operational concepts for the Indo-Pacific, which

will require new partners, access locations and regional infrastructure, likely leading to a degree of bureaucratic momentum as new initiatives are considered by US military services.^{10.7}

There is general support for further resources in Congress for a new slate of force posture changes in the region. This is critical for any substantial realignment of US military forces considering the significant infrastructure and logistic spending that may be required.^{10.8} The passage of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act by Congress – which established the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) – in late 2020 is a positive step in this direction. The PDI, a US\$2.2 billion account that is intended to directly fund and upgrade the United States' military footprint in the Indo-Pacific, will be a central tool for the Biden administration and an opportunity for allies.^{10.9}

NEW AMERICAN OR ALLIED POSTURE INITIATIVES IN AUSTRALIA AND THE REGION SHOULD FOCUS ON MAINTAINING AND EXPANDING OPERATIONAL ACCESS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA, ENABLING ENHANCED CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE REGIONAL STATES, AND UNDERWRITING DETERRENCE MISSIONS.

Australian interests

Australia has a significant interest in shaping and delivering new force posture initiatives that will both enable the objectives of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and improve the sustainability of US military presence in the region. Canberra's new strategic policy blueprint has underscored the need for Australia to develop the ADF's ability to deliver deterrent effects, contribute to coalition operations and respond to grey zone activities in Australia's immediate region.^{10.11} This will require an expanded list of potential operating locations, bases and sustainment hubs in Southeast Asia, the Pacific and the north-east Indian Ocean. Canberra will need to strengthen existing relationships with nations in those areas as well as leverage US access arrangements where mutually beneficial. While Australia is already reorientating its domestic force posture, upgrading airfields, developing new port facilities and expanding training ranges across the northern part of the country and in territories like the Cocos Keeling Islands and Christmas Island, much more will be required to support Australia's more active strategic policy agenda.^{10.12}

Policy recommendations

Using the recently established bilateral Force Posture Working Group, Australia and the United States should:

- **Establish a US maritime or naval force posture initiative in Australia.** With US Air Force and Marine initiatives well underway, a naval or maritime element would provide innumerable benefits and help sustain US military presence in the region. The US Navy faces a series of structural challenges, including growing demands on an overworked fleet, budgetary pressure and an increasingly active and capable China.^{10.13} Options to alleviate some of these pressures could include developing a maintenance or rotational deployment capability in Western Australia or providing a logistics hub for forward deployed lift assets and US Navy transports to enable more effective supply of dispersed forces.^{10.14}
- **Explore combined force posture initiatives in Australia's immediate region.** As both allies realign their respective force postures, there may be advantages to combining resources by establishing select combined facilities. This is already being trialled through the redevelopment of a naval facility on Manus Island.^{10.15} While the United States and Australia have substantially different requirements and interests in how they structure forces in the region, there are key overlaps – such as developing new operating locations that would facilitate greater Indian Ocean access or bolstering efforts aimed at easing logistics challenges.
- **Facilitate greater Australian use of US operating locations across the Indo-Pacific.** Australia's Defence Strategic Update calls for an ADF that is capable of executing independent deterrent effects in Australia's immediate region, countering grey zone coercion and joining wider coalition operations when required. This demands a more agile operational posture. In the future, elements of the ADF may need to move rapidly throughout the region, leading operations, contributing to coalition high-end deterrence missions and conducting independent manoeuvres in the same deployment.^{10.16} Greater access to US operating locations in Guam, the Philippines, Singapore and elsewhere would support the ADF in these tasks and help to augment Australia's contribution to upholding the regional order.