

A Cold and Clever U.S. Base Move

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The Diplomat

November 17, 2011

U.S. President Barack Obama's sheen may have worn off somewhat in the United States, but not in Australia. Yet amid the handshaking and backslapping, the photo opportunities and exultations of shared values, interests and history, it's easy to overlook the fact that Obama's trip "down under" is driven by cold strategic logic: to sell Australians on accepting a greater burden on behalf of their alliance with the United States.

That process has begun with a major enhancement of military cooperation between the two countries, to be concentrated in Australia's North West. The arrangement grants the U.S. military greater access to Australian bases, particularly airfields, as well as providing for more extensive training, ship visits and exercises, and the forward deployment of a small detachment of U.S. Marines. It also covers the prepositioning of materiel – fuel, ammunition and spare parts – creating the foundations of a latent staging point for the U.S. military in the Indian Ocean.

For many Australians, an enhanced U.S. presence in Australia is a beguiling prospect. Not only is it seen as a welcome symbol of Washington's enduring strength and resolve, but also as a more tangible expression of U.S. strategic commitment.

The reality is somewhat different. In fact, Washington's sudden interest in Australian real estate says less about its resilience than its relative decline. In particular, the quest for new bases reflects the way in which China's growing power has already begun hollowing out U.S. military dominance, pushing back the boundaries of U.S. primacy.

Indeed, while the United States has spent the past decade losing wars and squandering power, China has been studiously undercutting U.S. advantages across virtually every sphere of policy: economic, diplomatic and strategic. No longer the quiescent child it was when the United States took its eye off the ball, China has grown into a boisterous teenager – and has plenty of growing still to do. With the transformation of Asia's security order well underway, Washington now finds itself trying to reinvigorate its strategic presence in the face of a putative rival over whom its leverage has been greatly diminished.

Still, why the specific interest in Australia? Three reasons predominate.

The first reason is largely technical: over the past two decades, China has accumulated a formidable array of precision guided strike capabilities, namely long-range ballistic and cruise missiles, which can be launched from sea, air and land. These have been woven into an offensive war-fighting doctrine that places an operational premium on their use early and en-masse – and not just against U.S. ships at sea. Since U.S. bases in Japan, Korea and even Guam are increasingly at risk of being saturated by Chinese missiles at the outset of a conflict, they no longer constitute an indefinitely reliable basis from which the United States can project power.

The countries of Southeast Asia offer no viable alternative. They also lie within range of Chinese missiles. And though their governments clamor for U.S. support whenever China plays rough, they remain unwilling to be prematurely enlisted in U.S. military plans at the risk of becoming a target or arousing Chinese antipathy. Thus, U.S. interest in Australian real estate reflects a simple desire for a more flexible, dispersed posture. U.S. military planners recognize in an Australian staging point the

potential to restore the kind of time and space they're being deprived of in Northeast Asia, as well as options for an operational sanctuary beyond China's striking range. But what kind of operations do they have in mind?

As U.S. strategists reckon with the scope of Chinese military progress, they are developing an Indo-Pacific war plan for fighting China. In the Pacific, the U.S. Air Force and Navy are fleshing out the AirSea Battle concept, a war-fighting doctrine aimed at countering China's area-denial strategy head-on. It's a problematic concept, as I've written elsewhere. Nevertheless, by denying China's capacity for sea-denial, the United States intends to preserve its options for sea-control and power projection in the Western Pacific, reinforcing its credibility and role as the region's dominant player.

The second, more unspoken aspect of the strategy involves exploiting China's substantial vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean. Numerous factors combine to make this possible: China's geographic dislocation, which make it an external power; its dependence on the Indian Ocean for a great proportion of its seaborne trade, including energy imports from the Middle East; and, between the U.S. 5th and 7th fleets, a skewed balance of naval capability that will be hard for China to redress, even by asymmetric means. Taken together, this suggests an approach that would involve crippling China's economy by blockading or destroying its commercial shipping in war, and, in peacetime, holding it at risk to encourage Beijing's ongoing acquiescence.

It's a strategy out of Washington's World War II playbook. Indeed, the mere presence of a powerful allied naval contingent along China's sea-lines will require Beijing to divert considerable resources away from its immediate maritime periphery, much as it did with Japan in the 1940s, diluting the singularity of Chinese efforts in the Western Pacific.

This is where Australia comes in: as a central point between the two theatres, and, more importantly, as a base that can be made ready at relatively short notice to support an expanded commerce raiding or blockading campaign against China, most likely in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean.

The third motivation for an expanded U.S. presence in Australia is political. Washington is keenly aware of China's centrality to Australia's economic wellbeing. American strategists also recognize the extraordinary geographic advantages that Australia enjoys – a shoulder each in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, its back to Antarctica and shielded in front by a long archipelago. They understand what many Australians fail to see: that Canberra could, with some clear thinking and a substantial yet sustainable increase in spending, strike a more independent strategic posture, defending itself without becoming entangled in the power-politics of Northeast Asia. And they are determined to prevent Australia from becoming the ally that got away.

In this regard, Washington is being clever. It is taking full advantage of Australia's current strategic dependence, locking in Canberra's political and military support further, thereby minimizing the potential of any future Australian realignment.

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