

## Renewing an Alliance

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Today America's "first Pacific president" is in Australia's northern port of Darwin for a feel-good commemoration of U.S.-Australia alliance's 60th anniversary. But the focus on Darwin is really about the future. Yesterday Barack Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a significant expansion of America's military activities in the self-proclaimed gateway to Asia.

Plans to effectively base U.S. marines in Darwin have reignited a debate Down Under about Australia's strategic future. Can a country that depends so heavily on China for its prosperity remain a stalwart U.S. ally?

Some academics and businessmen say no—Australia needs to acknowledge Beijing's growing influence and should have no part in alleged U.S. efforts to contain it. The left-wing Australian Greens party, which holds the balance of power in the Senate as part of a precarious governing alliance with Labor, urges caution.

However, just because Australian trade with China is flourishing does not mean Australia must be a supplicant. Trade benefits both countries. What's more, critics are out of step with mainstream opinion. According to polling by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, 55% of Australians support U.S. military bases. The conservative opposition in parliament strongly backs the new arrangements. Today's decision should put paid, at least for now, to arguments for weakening Australia's alliance with America that has served well for more than half a century.

Improving cooperation now makes a lot of sense. Australia's forces will have valuable opportunities to train and operate closely with the world's most potent military. Marines and their equipment will operate from Darwin, starting with a modest rotational presence but building over time to 2,500. Military stores will be prepositioned there for use in the region and beyond. U.S. planes and personnel will make greater use of Australian bases and training ranges, including airfields in the north and northwest.

A greater U.S. presence will provide Australia with welcome strategic reassurance in a more uncertain regional security environment, helping to deter any potential aggressor. American forces will be able to respond quickly to contingencies in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean such as natural disasters and to engage more intensely with Southeast Asian military partners.

They will also be able to help calm the South China Sea, increasingly roiled by disputes over territory and resources. Critically, they will be safer than they would at exposed U.S. bases such as Guam, which is within ready striking range of China's burgeoning missile arsenal.

It's true the Darwin arrangement is no substitute for the major bases that host forward-deployed U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea. But Australia offers a politically stable, dependable jumping-off point with ready access to the Indian Ocean (including the Persian Gulf) and to the vital sea-lanes that join it to the Western Pacific.

Australia has long been the steadfast "southern anchor" of the U.S. alliance network in Asia, fighting alongside America in every major conflict since World War I. It already plays host to vital joint intelligence facilities and major joint exercises. Over the past decade, this partnership has become steadily closer. Australian forces have participated in the war on terror alongside their American counterparts in Afghanistan and Iraq; intelligence sharing has grown; a treaty to streamline defense industry ties has been ratified; and Australia is acquiring advanced new weapons systems that can plug easily into U.S.-led coalition operations.

And Australia should continue working with what is still the world's superpower to keep peace in the region. The U.S. never really left Asia, but Mr. Obama's current Asia tour is part of a wider effort by Washington to reassure its friends and allies that despite its economic travails and looming defense

cuts, America will not abandon them to face an increasingly assertive China on their own.

Belated U.S. trade leadership on the Trans-Pacific Partnership at the APEC summit in Honolulu is one key element in this strategy. Stronger diplomatic ties with Southeast Asia, which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has successfully pushed since last year, and maintaining a favorable military balance in the region are the other elements.

In the past, some of Australia's Southeast Asian neighbors might have seized on this announcement as evidence that Canberra was out of step with the region and too close to Washington. How things have changed. Singapore has built a dock able to accommodate American aircraft carriers and will host extended deployments by new, smaller U.S. naval vessels. Indonesia, the Philippines and even Vietnam are all moving quietly to strengthen security links with the United States. They may not say so publicly, but Australia's neighbors will quietly welcome the marines.

Beijing will grumble, but it has only itself to blame. By throwing around its increasing weight over the last couple of years, China has unnerved much of East Asia. Its behavior is driving U.S. friends and allies even more firmly into Washington's arms and creating unlikely new security partnerships, despite the fact that for many China is now a major trading partner.

The future of this key relationship depends on whether America's "pivot" to Asia proves to be a lasting trend or a passing media sound bite. U.S. friends and allies in the region, and its rising competitor, will be watching closely to see that U.S. defense cuts do not undermine security in Asia.

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