

Pacific president leaves a mark Down Under

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U.S. President Barack Obama has just visited Canberra and Darwin, Australia's northern port and military hub, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Australia-U.S. alliance.

During his visit Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a major increase in U.S. military activity in Australia. Governments around Asia, including Tokyo, will be attempting to gauge how the move affects their own interests and Asia's rapidly changing military balance.

It is important to be clear, however, about what the announcement means and does not mean. For one thing, Australian and U.S. officials are clear that it does not mean that U.S. bases in Japan are any less important. The Japan-U.S. alliance remains the linchpin of the American forward presence in Asia. But new geostrategic realities have necessitated adjustments in the U.S. military posture.

Australia has long been the steadfast southern anchor of the United States' network of alliances in Asia, complementing America's vital alliance with Japan. Australia has fought alongside America in every major conflict since World War I and has long hosted vital joint intelligence facilities and major joint exercises.

Over the past decade, the security and intelligence partnership has become steadily closer, particularly as a result of Australia's close involvement in the war on terror on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq (where Australian Diggers also provided force protection for Japanese Self-Defense Forces engineers undertaking reconstruction tasks).

Now the relationship is set to become even tighter. Military supplies will be pre-positioned 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. 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, in short, is a strategic pivot in the vast maritime expanse that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has described as the "Indo-Pacific."

The most significant aspect of the announcement is that U.S. Marines and their equipment will operate from Darwin, starting with a modest presence of 250 troops in 2012 but building over time to a Marine Air Ground Task Force of 2,500 Marines present for six-month rotations.

This has led to speculation in some quarters that all of the Marines and other military assets currently hosted in Japan could eventually be transferred to Australia.

This is not the case. Access to facilities in Australia will help to relieve some of the pressure, but it is no substitute for the major bases that host forward-deployed U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea. Canberra and Washington will not replicate the air and naval hubs on the Japanese archipelago that are indispensable to U.S. power projection.

Darwin and other facilities in Australia are also simply too far from likely trouble spots in Northeast Asia such as Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula to offer a viable alternative.

Nonetheless, the new arrangements in Australia offer significant benefits not just for the United States and Australia but for the region more widely, including for Japan.

U.S. forces operating from northern Australia 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 exert a calming influence over the South China Sea. Critically, they will be safer than they would be at exposed U.S. bases such as Guam, which is within ready striking range of China's burgeoning missile arsenal.

A more distributed, flexible and resilient U.S. force posture in Asia will increase America's ability to deter and if necessary defeat future threats--ensuring that Asia continues to enjoy the stability and prosperity that it has experienced for the past few decades.

China is likely to grumble about the Darwin announcement: Beijing is quick to play the containment card to discourage cooperation among America and its allies. 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.

Reckless approaches by Chinese ships and aircraft close to vessels of Japan's Self-Defense Forces are one example; Beijing's successful effort to intimidate Tokyo into returning the detained trawler skipper is another.

All around the region, China's assertive behavior is driving U.S. friends and allies even more firmly into Washington's arms. President Obama's Darwin stopover is just the latest example.

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