

Tricky strategy comes down to base issues

Hugh White
The Age
29 March 2012
P. 15

People in the Pentagon want to operate US aircraft and drones from Australia's Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Looked at closely, there is less to the idea than first meets the eye. But when we step back a pace or two, it becomes part of a larger pattern that is very important indeed. There is much more to it than meets the eye, and it is very worrying.

Seen in isolation, the Cocos base idea is no big deal for two reasons. First, allowing use of airbases like this is the kind of thing that allies do for one another. The Malaysians allow us to use their airbase at Butterworth, after all.

Second, it seems a long time off. Defence Minister Stephen Smith made plain that American access to Cocos comes at the bottom of his list of new things America's military might soon be doing on or from Australian soil.

But seeing the Cocos idea in isolation would be a big mistake, because as Smith emphasised, it is only one small part of a bigger pattern that amounts to a fundamental change in how our alliance with the US works, and what it expects of us.

The other parts of the pattern are all the other things Smith said were being discussed: the marine deployments to Darwin; increased use of our mainland airbases by US military aircraft, and most intriguingly of all, the proposal to operate US aircraft carriers and submarines from Stirling Naval Base south of Perth.

It amounts to the biggest expansion of American interest in military access to Australia since World War II. For decades, Australia has been unique among America's close allies because we did not host US military bases. And that was only because the US didn't want them.

So the big question is, what has changed to make the US now so interested in military facilities here, when for decades they haven't been interested at all? It's about China. That is the big thing that's changed. It is about building America's military position in Asia to resist China's growing challenge to American primacy in Asia.

How does a drone operating off Cocos or a carrier operating out of Stirling help America deal with China? A lot of people argue it is all about "force protection". American forces based near China are increasingly vulnerable to China's growing missile and submarine capabilities. Pulling them back to Australia gets them out of China's range. But it also means they are no longer within range of China. So what use are they against China?

One answer is that America accepts that future military confrontations with China will not be limited to China's own approaches in the north-east Pacific where America used to assume any clash would take place. They now see the US-China front line moving much closer to Australia, making access to bases in Australia much more practical.

The other answer is that the US wants bases here only for symbolic and political reasons. When Prime Minister Gillard announced during President Obama's visit that US marines would rotate through Darwin, it was seen as a massive vote of Australian support for the hard-line US policy towards China that the President spelled out. The more talk there is about further US basing here, the clearer the message that Australia is backing the US against China.

In the tussle for influence in Asia between Beijing and Washington, this kind of thing counts as a big win for America.

But that is no consolation for Australia. This means US basing proposals are not about drawing American forces back further from China, but about dragging Australia into America's escalating

rivalry with our biggest trading partner.

Is that so bad? If China tries to dominate Asia by force, then we would have no choice but to help America resist, and we should. But there is a risk that America is launching military containment of China before it has explored whether they might be able to avoid strategic rivalry.

That could turn out to be the worst kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. And anyone who is inclined to think that America would defeat China in any strategic contest the way it beat the Soviets has forgotten a vital difference. China's economy works.

For Australia, escalating strategic rivalry between the US and China would be a disaster whatever happened. Yet we are encouraging Washington by agreeing to expand military co-operation to support its containment of Beijing.

Before the government talks to the Pentagon about Cocos, it needs to talk to them seriously about China.

Hugh White is professor of strategic studies at ANU and a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute.