

US and Australia discuss joint military base in Indian Ocean

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According to an article in the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) last Saturday, the US and Australia have discussed the establishment of a jointly-run military air base on the Cocos Islands, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, as part of bilateral defence talks over the past year.

The revelation takes on particular significance amid US President Barack Obama's tour of the Asia-Pacific region, which included stops in Hawaii and Australia, and last weekend's Asian summit in Bali. Obama's tour was aimed at consolidating an anti-China coalition composed of long-time regional allies such as Australia and the Philippines as well as newer partners.

In Australia, Obama announced plans to establish a major military staging base at Darwin, a city in northern Australia, that will host up to 2,500 US marines. The US military will also increase its use of existing air bases and ports in northern and western Australia.

These moves will boost the US military presence in the Indian Ocean and in waters to the north of Australia—including the strategic Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits that connect to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The US has also been enhancing military ties with the Philippines, Vietnam and Singapore.

The AFR article was the first time that a possible US military base on the Cocos Islands had been mooted. Located some 2,110 kilometres from the Western Australian coast, the tiny collection of coral islands is of geo-strategic significance because of its proximity to the Malacca Strait. Like Darwin, the Cocos Islands

served as an important allied military base during the Second World War.

The islands, also known as the Keeling Islands, are currently used by the Australian airforce as a refuelling stop for its Orion surveillance aircraft. What has been discussed is upgrading the facilities as a joint air base to enable the US air force to monitor key shipping lanes.

Explaining the purpose of a US-Australian base in the Indian Ocean, Andrew Davies, an Australian Strategic Policy Institute analyst, told the AFR: "I don't think we would be looking at basing a lot of US and Australian troops on the Indian Ocean territories, because they are too far away from North Asia, but you could see a joint air base established to conduct surveillance of the busy shipping lane to the North."

Davies noted that other Indian Ocean bases accessible to the US military such as Diego Garcia, are a "long way from the South China Sea or vital sea lanes threading the Indonesian archipelago." He noted: "Australia's offshore territories at Christmas or Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean could provide a suitable forward staging base for American aircraft."

According to the AFR, "Davies added that US war gaming had already considered using a base in the Indian Ocean to support a 'blockade of Chinese shipping' though he warned that would be a 'very high stakes game'."

As the AFR pointed out, no formal proposals have been made. Moreover, the Cocos Island base, which lacks adequate supplies of fresh water and a decent

harbour, would require considerable upgrading.

However, Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith did confirm in comments on Channel 10 television yesterday that “down the track, there may well be some greater use of the Cocos Islands” by the US and Australian military.

The AFR reported today that a high-level defence review examining ways to strengthen the Australian military presence in the Indian Ocean “is currently looking at the future strategic role of the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island in close consultation with Washington.” A preliminary report is due in December.

Under the guise of “border protection” to prevent refugees from reaching Australia, the Labor government, following on from the previous Liberal-National coalition government, has significantly expanded naval and air force surveillance of broad areas of ocean to the north and west of Australia.

The Australian government’s caution in announcing the plan is conditioned by concerns that heightened US-Australian military cooperation will impact on Australian trade with China. Reacting to last week’s announcement of US Marines in Darwin, an editorial in the state-owned *People’s Daily* warned that “if Australia uses its military bases to help the US harm Chinese interests, then Australia itself will be caught in the crossfire.”

China is particularly sensitive to the US military build-up as it is well aware that American naval strategists have long regarded the straits connecting the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea as vital “choke points” that could be used to cut off essential supplies to China in the event of any conflict. Around 80 percent of China’s oil imports are shipped from the Middle East and Africa via the Straits of Malacca.

Sections of the Australian political establishment are concerned that the Gillard government’s commitment to the aggressive US stance on China will affect Australian exports to China. Earlier this month, Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University, described the proposed US base in

Darwin, as “potentially a very risky move for Australia.” He stated: “In Washington and Beijing, this will be seen as Australia aligning itself with an American strategy to contain China.”

Whether or not the Cocos Island airbase eventuates, the talks underway between the US and Australia are another pointer to the scope of the American military build-up in the region. They also demonstrate that despite Washington’s denials, its aim is to contain China with a string of bases stretching from Japan and South Korea through South East Asia to the Indian subcontinent.



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