

# US military looks to expand use of Australian bases and ports

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During a visit to Australia earlier this month, the American Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert flagged the prospect of the US military rotating a naval Amphibious Ready Group to the port of Darwin, in the country's far north. Following agreements struck between the US and Australia in 2011, US marines are already based in Darwin for six months of the year. By 2016–2017, the deployment will consist of an entire 2,500-strong Marine Air Ground Task Force.

An Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) generally consists of a 44,000 tonne amphibious assault ship—which can carry some 1,700 troops, vehicles, landing craft and an assortment of helicopters and vertical take-off jet fighters—as well as two 20,000 tonne dock landing ships. The smaller vessels also carry landing craft and some 500 troops. The presence of an ARG in Darwin would enable the entire marine rotation in northern Australia to be rapidly embarked and deployed to operations in South East Asia or the South China Sea.

An aspect of Greenert's visit was to receive briefings on the upgrades required to Darwin's port to accommodate such large warships. He indicated that the US Navy would want a basing arrangement in place by 2020 at the latest.

“Right now,” Greenert told a forum at the Australian National University in Canberra on February 10, “it's at the stage of ‘what's the art of the possible’? What kind of infrastructure exists... what kind of support measures, and how would that fit into the two nations' common strategic desires into the future... It's the early stages, but we are considering it, the two of us.”

Other developments point to the further integration of the US and Australian militaries and preparations for the expanded American use of Australian bases.

The US Defense Department and the Australian Defence Force are conducting a joint study into a range of options involving the basing of other US warships in Australia. In particular, the feasibility of “rotating” an entire US aircraft carrier battlegroup to the port of Stirling near Perth in Western Australia, which was recommended in 2012 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is one of the possibilities under examination. However, more than \$1 billion would need to be spent to upgrade the port to ensure it could cater for the long-term presence of nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed vessels.

The Australian Navy commissioned the Canberra, its first 27,500 tonne amphibious assault ship last November. Like similar American vessels, it carries landing craft, six to eight helicopters, a 400-strong marine assault force and up to 110 vehicles and their crews, including tanks. The Australian Army has been training its own marines over the past three years, with the assistance of the US. A second ship to transport them will come into service next year. Combined, the US and Australian militaries could dispatch a force of 3,500 heavily armed troops from Darwin, complete with air support, anywhere in the region.

In December, the Australian military opened a new \$125 million logistics complex in Darwin, consisting of an array of heavily-fortified and cyclone-proof buildings to store tanks, armoured vehicles, explosives and ammunition, and general supplies. It includes repair workshops and weapons' testing facilities.

Retired Australian Major General Peter Haddon told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “My understanding is those who are in charge today see this as a potential site for doing some of that support for the marines.”

Since the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime

Minister Julia Gillard signed the agreement for the US Marines to be based in Darwin, American long-range B-52 bombers now spend up to six months a year at airbases in Darwin and nearby Tindal, making use of the large training ranges in Australia's north. The political establishment and the mass media have been all but silent on the presence of aircraft, which can carry an undisclosed payload of nuclear weapons.

A major expansion of the key US satellite base at Pine Gap in central Australia, which provides targeting information for everything from drone missile attacks to potential nuclear strikes, was completed at the end of 2014. At the end of 2013, the US military announced that it would base its new state-of-the-art Space Surveillance Telescope at the North West Cape base in Western Australia, making the site a crucial facility in monitoring satellites orbiting the earth, particularly Chinese and Russian military satellites, and providing targeting information for their destruction.

As of 2018, Australian facilities in Newcastle and Melbourne will serve as the South Pacific maintenance hubs for all US military Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighters operating in the region, as well as the South Korea's F-35s and Australia's own complement of the aircraft.

The ever-closer US-Australia military relations are bound up with the so-called US "pivot" or "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific to militarily and politically confront and isolate China. Under successive Labor and Liberal governments, Australia has provided indispensable support to the US agenda, which amounts to the threat of war if China does not make the sweeping economic and strategic concessions being demanded by Washington.



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