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US Marines in Northern Australia: Strategic Benefits with Social Costs

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

There are strategic benefits for Australia and the US in having American marines in Northern Australia. While this is so, serious social problems might also arise requiring careful management by both countries.

Commentary

PRESIDENT OBAMA and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard jointly announced this week extensive new arrangements for increased US access to Australian military bases. Speaking at a press conference while on a visit to Canberra on 16 November, Obama said the US was stepping up its commitment to the entire Asia Pacific.

US marines will reportedly use the large Robertson Army Barracks outside of Darwin in northern Australia. These barracks were established in the 1990s as a reflection of Australia's changing strategic circumstances following the end of the Cold War. They allowed the move of major army units from existing bases in south-eastern Australia to the North.

The language of the two national leaders were carefully chosen to describe US use of Robertson Barracks. Instead of "basing", there were references to "positioning" and "rotations". This is intended to accommodate the strong opposition to the increased American military presence in Australia likely to come from the Australian Greens Party and the left-wing of the Australian Labor Party.

Strategic Benefits

Other Australians will question whether the strategic and possible economic benefits of having US marines in Darwin outweigh the major social problems that their presence may create. Darwin is a volatile community with higher levels of crime, drug and alcohol abuse than any other Australian city. It has a large aboriginal population and more males than females. Sexual violence figures prominently in its crime statistics. Hundreds of US marines seeking rest and recreation will not help the situation. The experience of the American military in Okinawa gives few grounds for optimism that ugly incidents can be avoided.

The strategic alliance between Australia and the US is long-standing and the most enduring of any that the US has in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. The increased US military presence in Australia is a strong practical demonstration that this alliance is as strong as ever. There are strategic benefits for both parties.

China has expressed concern about the US military presence in Australia, but both Australia and the US believe that this concern can be managed.

For the US, its military presence increases its strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. It is another demonstration that the US has a long-term strategic commitment to these regions. The US marines in Darwin will have access to training facilities not available elsewhere in the Western Pacific. Key front-line fighting units of the Australian Army are based at Robertson Barracks, including the 1st Brigade, the 1st Armoured Regiment with its Abram tanks, and the 1st Aviation Regiment with Tiger armed reconnaissance helicopters. Extensive training areas outside of Darwin provide unique opportunities for joint exercises involving American and Australian land forces.

Australia gains strategic benefit from the increased US military presence at a time when there is increased concern in Canberra about stability both in the Indian Ocean and East Asia. The close links evident between Australian and US force postures will help buttress US presence in the Indian Ocean, as well as in the Western Pacific. The announcement of the increased US military presence in Australia, particularly in the western part of the continent, is in line with Canberra's plans to increase its own military presence along the West coast and in the Indian Ocean.

Social Issues

Darwin is not a tropical paradise and keeping the marines happy in their off duty hours will not be easy. For much of the year, during the "dry" season, Darwin is a hot, dusty place, and then for the rest of the year, during the "wet" season, it experiences heavy rain, frequent flash squalls and occasional severe cyclones. On Christmas Eve 1974, Darwin was devastated by Cyclone Tracy that killed 71 people and destroyed over 70% of the city's buildings.

The change of season from the "dry" to the "wet" in October-November each year brings the so-called "silly season", when the humidity becomes oppressive, people behave erratically, and the suicide rate is high. Just to add to the rigours of life in the "Top End", as this part of northern Australia is known, crocodiles lurk in local river systems and waterholes.

Recreational activities for the marines will be difficult. Darwin does not have the "bright lights" they may be accustomed to near other bases in Asia or Hawaii. There is a hard drinking, hard playing culture in Darwin with an endemic drug scene. Testosterone-driven males can get into a lot of trouble in the place, and over the years, the Australian Army has experienced serious morale and social problems with its soldiers at Robertson Barracks.

Managing the Problem

There will be a challenge for Australian and American military authorities in avoiding a repeat in Darwin of the "Battle of Brisbane" that occurred in November 1942. Large numbers of troops from the two countries were then based in Brisbane, but discontent among Australian soldiers mainly due to envy of the conditions of service enjoyed by their American counterparts, particularly access to post exchange (PX) stores with cheap alcohol, cigarettes and luxury goods, led to serious brawling around the city. One soldier was killed and many injured, including some with gun-shot wounds.

A fundamental requirement will be to ensure that the conditions enjoyed by personnel from the two countries are roughly similar. Regular joint exercises, sporting competitions and access for the Americans to the many unique tourist attractions that exist out of Darwin, such as Kakadu National Park, will all help to generate a more favourable social environment both on base and when personnel of the two countries are on leave together in and around Darwin.

Despite strong links between the militaries of the two countries, the US marines will be just as challenged to be good ambassadors for their country in Darwin as they are on foreign bases elsewhere in the world.

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