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Is a US Marine base in Darwin really a good idea?

[Matthew Thompson](#)

[Editor](#)



US Marines in the Philippines practising knife skills with their local counterparts in 2010. Flickr/United States Marine Corps Official Page.

The Labor Government will reportedly allow the US to [permanently base](#) American Marines in Darwin.

If this goes ahead, Australia will join a [long list of countries](#) around the world that host American soldiers, including former US colonies such as the Philippines and Cuba, its vanquished WWII foes, Japan and Germany, and scores of other countries. What does it mean for Australia?

Expert reactions below, and your comments are welcome at the end.

Assistant Professor Robin Tennant-Wood, Faculty of Business and Government, University of Canberra

The establishment of a permanent US Marine base in Darwin could have catastrophic consequences for the Darwin community if their reputation in other Pacific rim bases is anything to go by.

There will, of course, be a lot of talk about boosting the Northern Territory economy and strengthening the Australia-US alliance. Darwin, however, is a small city with a population of less than 130,000, of whom around 10 per cent are Indigenous Australians. A hefty Australian military presence in the city accounts for a further 8 per cent of the population. It has the youngest median age of any Australian city and the highest population turnover of any major city: the 2006 census recorded that 46 per cent of the population had changed in the five years since the previous census.

Due partly to its demographic composition and partly to its isolation, Darwin faces a wall of social problems that the Territory government already struggles to address. A US Marine base with a rotating population is unlikely to help.

It is unknown at this stage what numbers the proposed US base would be bringing in, but their bases in other regional centres are significant: 35,000 military personnel plus 5000 civilian support in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan and 29,000 in six bases in South Korea.

In Okinawa alone, in the period 1952-2004, over 200,000 incidents or accidents including

the deaths of almost 11,00 Japanese civilians were directly attributable to the US forces. That's just over 21 civilian locals killed each year. About 90 per cent of these incidents were traffic related. In Japan, like Australia, traffic drives on the left hand side of the road. Perhaps more alarmingly, criminal offences perpetrated by US service or support personnel in Okinawa account for around one-third of all crime in the prefecture with a total population of 1.3 million.

Darwin already has the highest crime rate of any Australian city; the highest imprisonment rate in Australia (and one of the highest in the world); and the highest Australian rate of homelessness. In 2007 the Australian Institute of Criminology found that almost 75 per cent of people "arrested or detained by police in Darwin were under the influence of illicit drugs." Similarly, rates of use and abuse of alcohol are higher in Darwin than in any other Australian city. In May this year it was reported that a spike in the number of cases of sexually transmitted diseases and hepatitis had been recorded.

Add a US Marine base to the mix and it likely that many of these social problems will worsen rather than improve. As US military personnel pay taxes to the US government the expected boost to the economy is unlikely to increase the capacity of the NT government to increase health services, crisis accommodation for the homeless, crime prevention programs and drug and alcohol programs. It is unlikely to assist in lifting school retention rates for Indigenous kids or create more apprenticeships or places in tertiary education.

If the Howard-G.W.Bush alliance made Australians slightly squeamish, the Gillard-Obama one may also be cause for concern.



Guantanamo Bay. A US Marine Major General, Michael R. Lehnert, commanded the task force that in 2002 built and initially ran the prison at the US's naval base in Cuba.

AAP/EPA/Shawn Thew

Dr Anthony Ashbolt, Senior Lecturer, History and Politics, University of Wollongong

The American alliance is simply too costly for Australia both in terms of human lives and international relations. While our political leaders prattle on about "getting the job done", an Orwellian nightmare persists in Afghanistan and the police we train [torture detainees](#) and are deeply enmeshed in the drug trade, the troops we train turn into Taliban and the Government we prop up is no better, in moral or philosophical terms, than its enemy in the field.

The American Century is well and truly over and it is time to forge new associations and to think not in terms of military alliances but rather in terms of alliances built upon peaceful relations. Our subservience to the United States does us no good in the eyes of growing powers like China, India and Brazil. Sending a hostile signal to China, as an expanded US military presence in Australia would do, is particularly foolhardy.

You might think a Labor Government would have learnt lessons from Vietnam, lessons about being involved in war crimes and human rights abuses as well as lessons about the folly of imperial wars. It seems such a long time since senior Labor figures like Jim Cairns and Tom Uren marched in the streets against the American War (as the Vietnamese rightly call it). Now our Labor leaders wave American flags and help expand the American empire of bases.

A former Defence Minister even gave an honorary Order of Australia medal to General David Petraeus and thus legitimized the invasion and devastation of Iraq. It is time to say farewell to the American empire and to forge a new and independent identity.



Iraqi houses suspected of containing improvised explosive devices come under tank-fire as US Marines advance.

Flickr/expertinfantry

Dr Mike Metcalfe, Strategic Thinking, School Of Management, University of South Australia

My first thought is what role the US sees for Australia. I guess it is potentially, if hostilities break out, to blockade China from getting past Singapore to the oil in the Middle East. Our being in the same time zone roughly with East Asia adds to this, plus Darwin offers 'jungle' training. It will be a good earner for Australia, and a good exposure to young Americans of Australian products.



US Marines patrol a village in Afghanistan.

Flickr/United States Marine Corps Official

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Dr Kelvin McQueen, Faculty of The Professions, School of Education, University of New England

There are disturbing reports that the Gillard government is giving the US Marines a base in Darwin. Not since the Vietnam War will Australia have seen such an invasion of US military personnel into its territory. But it's 35 years since that war ended, so what is the threat to both the US and Australia that necessitates a Marine base in our northern capital?

Whatever that threat is, it is not a clear and present danger: not even in the sense of the tumbling dominoes used to justify intervention in Vietnam. The threat is that the squares on the checker-board of the Great Game are being filled up fast by a power in a position to take advantage of the economic recession of the Atlantic powers.

This current global situation is characterised by [John Bellamy Foster](#) as "the attempts of Washington to restore and expand its global hegemony, using its military power to enhance its economic position". [William Tabb](#) provides a finer-grained analysis of the motives for the current round of US expansion. It is in part spurred on by "the financial turbulence that has gripped the economy of the United States".

But there is also a growing resistance to US economic and military imperialism, according to Tabb, since it "has been discredited both in terms of its regime-change-wars-of-choice and the increasingly effective resistance to the international financial and trade regime we know

as the Washington Consensus” – not least exemplified by ongoing Japanese problems with Okinawa, Taiwanese moderation and Filipino reluctance to expand US bases. Even formerly friendly Pacific islands may not anymore be the best frontline bases, especially with China gazumping the US and Europe in deal-making there.

So beyond the US’s economic imperatives facilitated by gunboat “diplomacy” is the fact that China is the ultimate target: its pieces on the checker-board must be contained and removed if possible. As Tabb puts it: “new centers of power in what had been the peripheries of the capitalist system and the tensions this has unleashed, [are] providing room to maneuver for countries wishing to break with the United States.” In other words, Chinese success could lead to a rush to the door by other nations and even by European powers.

Where is that likely to leave Australia?

When imperial power starts to fade, as was the case with Britain’s in the early 20th century, it seems that Australian politicians’ response is to tie us ever closer to the sinking ship. An appropriate metaphor given what happened at Singapore.

The Darwin base will be used to guard/intervene in the naval oil and gas routes around South East Asia, not least those radiating from Australia, and provide a springboard into/fallback position from South Asia. That is, it is for forward projection, not Australia’s defence. This will hardly create a good look with our neighbours as we try to convince them that our regional engagement is genuine and not simply a stalking horse for US ambitions.

In the long run, if US economic power falters, which nevertheless is quite a way off, then their bases anywhere will not be able to guarantee safety, especially for peripheral, and dare I say disposable, regions like Australasia.

As [Scott Newton](#) reminds us, “If a constitutional order ... rigidifies a certain constellation of social and economic power within one territory at one point from that point forward, an imperial order rigidifies a similar constellation of power across territories and from one (metropolitan) to another (colonial) territory.” That’s what’s happening in Darwin: a more rigid incorporation of Australia into the US project in Asia and the Middle East. A project not of defence and stability, but of aggressive projection, pre-emption and subordination, what Foster calls “potentially the deadliest period in the history of imperialism.” If we sow this wind in Darwin, then we’ll reap the whirlwind.



US Marines atop a rebranded local military vehicle in Grenada, during Operation Urgent Fury, the US's 1983 invasion of the Caribbean nation. Flickr/expertinfantry

Dr David Palmer, Senior Lecturer in American Studies, Flinders University

I was amazed at this announcement, now so open. However, the role of the US military on Australian land has a long history going back to World War II. What is so disturbing about this latest development is that there is no need for these troops on our soil now.

For decades the US and Australia have conducted joint military exercises that have been quite large – in Queensland. The US maintains one of the most important intelligence interception bases in the world at Woomera, South Australia. And there is the planned docking of US warships in Adelaide’s port. Australia has emerged as the most secure

overseas US military location in the world, as both Labor and Liberal leadership are completely committed to being under US military influence. The US has strategic bases in other parts of the Pacific and Indian Oceans – Japan, Diego Garcia being the key ones. But Australia is a continent, and does not face the opposition to bases that has long existed in Japan (not just Okinawa but in the main islands, particularly near Tokyo).

We must ask, however, why is Australia now coming under such US military presence in so many areas? This military influence extends further – into media (the Murdoch oligopoly) and into universities. And major corporations back this move.

In South Australia we have the largest concentration of uranium in the world – some 40 per cent – and soon Olympic Dam will be the world's largest uranium mine. US strategic interests – in military terms – involve more than just hardware, bases, and troops – it also involves control of strategic resources. This strategic doctrine was initiated in World War II when President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with the Saudis and laid out the position of the US regarding oil reserves. Military commanders knew that key regions sought by the Axis powers aimed to control oil to further their expansion. Japan seized Sumatra with this objective, while Germany pushed into the Caucasus for the same reason, but were diverted into the battle of Stalingrad due to Hitler's egomaniac "dual" with his Soviet nemesis. President Truman extended this doctrine into a global one with the onset of the Cold War. In recent times, this doctrine has become a primary driver for US foreign policy. Both wars involving Iraq (the Gulf War and later the invasion / occupation) had oil as their primary motivation, as most now accept. And Afghanistan is the gateway to the resource riches of Central Asia (so well documented by scholars such as Ahmed Rashid).

Today the resources wars are broader, and uranium – and control of it – is a key one. As for Australia's location – it borders both the Indian Ocean and has strategic access to South Asia, but it also borders the Pacific and in military terms is key to East and Southeast Asia. General MacArthur and the Americans retreated to Australia after the Philippines defeat – it was the only secure location in this part of the world – and today it is the most secure.

The contradiction is that China is now Australia's major trading partner, and immigration from China to Australia dwarfs that from the US. China and Australia are natural partners economically and demographically, yet this whole military strategy with the US is in fact aimed at China as "the enemy." Does anyone in their right mind expect China to "attack" much less "invade" Australia? No. This military occupation by the US – which in reality is what is happening – is a rear guard positioning for potential conflict on the mainland. But China does not need to "occupy" Southeast Asia militarily. It can do so through economic influence and control, much as it would like to do with Australia (such as having control over Australian real estate, land, and minerals). Yet our leaders ignore this growing danger of "economic occupation" by China even as they embrace "military occupation" by the U.S.

The alternative is for Australia to declare its independence – both in economic and military terms. It can maintain good relations with the U.S. but end this growing military incursion. It can maintain good relations and trade with China, but make our natural resources (land, minerals) off limits. This is what sovereignty is about. The old colonialism was British. The new colonialism is American. It is time we stopped being a colony of foreign powers – and finally become independent.



A US Marine takes a retina scan of an Iraqi civilian in Fallujah, Iraq. Flickr/expertinfantry

Professor Damien Kingsbury, Director, Centre for Citizenship, Development and Human Rights, Deakin University, Melbourne

The agreement to allow US Marines to be stationed in Darwin reflects a changing security dynamic in the Asia-Pacific region, in which the growth and strategic reach of China is the main factor. The United States seeks to construct a method of potential containment for any potential security challenge, with Australia being a lynch-pin in that policy. Under the US-Australia alliance, Darwin becomes a logical base at which to locate US Marine forces.

The question is, however, what this implies for Australian foreign policy and, to some extent, Australia's continued reliance on the US as its main guarantor in the international arena. Australia has been closely strategically tied to the US since 1942 and has committed itself to a range of pro-US military, strategic and diplomatic initiatives since then. Given that some of these initiatives have clearly reflected errors of judgment, such as the Vietnam War (the 'American War' to the Vietnamese), and the invasions of Iraq (ended without resolution) and Afghanistan (likely failure), there are grounds for questioning Australia's policy position. However, while China does not present a direct or immediate threat to Australia, its strategic shadow is growing, now extending into the Indian Ocean (Sri Lanka), South-East Asia (Timor-Leste) and the Pacific (Fiji). These areas are of direct interest and potential concern to Australia. The US has already taken some 'soft power' measures to counteract China's growing influence, but the establishment of a 'hard power' option in Australia and in particular in Australia's northern reaches, makes strategic sense to both the US and to Australia as a longer term option. That the two countries have a strong history of alliance, despite its costs, mean that the establishment of a Marines base in Darwin is a logical next step.

Because of the costs – being tied to US strategic mistakes – many will oppose the establishment of the base in Darwin. But the costs of refusing such a base, in terms of Australia's alliance with the US and its wider complex of strategic, diplomatic and economic linkages, mean that the only realistic option will concern the size, function and longevity of the base. The alternative is to break an association that would leave Australia internationally isolated which, as a self-proclaimed 'middle power', it does not wish to do, especially within its own rapidly evolving region.



US Marines shelling their enemies in Fallujah, Iraq, during 2004's Operation Phantom Fury. Flickr/expertinfantry

Dr Glenn Mitchell, Senior Lecturer and Convenor in History, University of Wollongong

As I write I cannot get that Midnight Oil song [US Forces](#) out of my head – especially the opening line, “US Forces give the nod”.

Well it certainly seems like we have done just that – given the nod to an expansion of US military presence in Australia. We already have [Pine Gap](#) and other US military installations

and now a base in Darwin. It seems that the base will not be a base however and while it might be permanent we are being assured that it will not be permanent.

Many Australians have a long-standing antagonism to a US military presence on Australian soil – academics, peace activists, anti-nuclear campaigners, the Medical Association for Prevention of War, and the Greens, to name but a few have developed significant arguments against this presence. And arguments which fall neatly into the “we are in alliance with the United States and this development is consistent with the spirit of that alliance” fails to answer questions about the timing and reason(s) for the base. This broad rhetoric certainly fails against the following questions:

Put simply, why does America need this base in this place at this particular time? Is there a threat from someone? If so, who is the ‘someone’ and what is the nature of threat? If there is, as many commentators argue, a fear of Chinese military expansion into the Pacific, what is this nature of this fear? And where is the debate about what Australia could/should do in the Pacific with regards to Australia’s security? And while the base in Darwin – which is not a base – might satisfy America’s military objectives, will it reduce rather than increase our security by perhaps making us a bigger target?



US Marines patrolling in Afghanistan.
AAP/EPA/Patrick Hattori

Associate Professor Wayne Reynolds, History (specialising in Australian defence and foreign relations), University of Newcastle

Obama’s visit to Australia in November this year, his first since becoming President, comes at a time when the US is under pressure to assert its primary role on the Asian region. From the US standpoint this will be an attempt to regain the initiative in Asia since it lacks the economic leverage that it once had. On the other hand he will want regional support for US trade proposals on such as issues as trade imbalances. The discussions around US bases in Australia apparently occurred when Stephen Smith went to Washington DC recently. The in-principle discussions about closer co-operation would have taken place over an even longer time frame. I am anticipating that Obama might find the occasion of his visit a perfect time to announce something on the Trans-Pacific Partnership involving Australia, South Korea, Australia and Japan. If this occurs it will be couched as a geo-strategic initiative rather than a narrowly focused economic or trade proposal. In a sense it is new in that historically the US has eschewed any proposals for meaningful regional arrangements, especially when they included powers with whom they enjoyed bilateral security relations. In a sense it operated as a sort of ‘hubs and spokes’ system – with the US as the hub.

The other pressing security concern is the status of India as a security partner (and its potential role as a nuclear partner) and the region to the West. In this regard he may also say something about the importance of Indian Ocean and energy security as a basis for increasing US naval basing rights in Western Australia.

From the Australian point of view any announcements on quasi-strategic agreements need to be mindful of the importance of trade issues. Beyond that it will be important that any regional arrangement for security is both comprehensive and inclusive. The relationship with India as a security partner will be discussed but, interestingly, Obama will almost certainly

add his weight to the pressure to have Australia approve the export of uranium as part of a civil nuclear deal.

Comments welcome below.

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