

The Presence of Foreign Troops in Australia: The US Marines in Darwin

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*Subordinates rarely have a good time of dictating matters to their superiors. In the webbed power relations that pass as realpolitik, Australia is the well behaved child in the front of the room, yearning to be caned and spoilt in equal measure. Ever since Australia's **Prime Minister John Curtin** cast his eye to Washington in an act of desperation during the Second World War, fearing defeat at the hands of the Japanese and British abandonment, the United States has maintained its role, a brute to be relied upon, even as it careers into the next disaster. An underlying rationale since then has been dangerously simple: With the United States, right or wrong, sober or drunk.*

An important element in the relationship has been the forced belief that the US has no bases in Australia, preferring the untidy ruse of rotation. A base implies permanency, garrisons with darkened influences on the local populace, followed by the all-too-predictable requirement for courts martial. A rotation on exercise suggests a casual visit and a bit of sunny fun.

The US armed forces, as **Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton** in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, do this with callous freedom under the broader aegis of the alliance with Canberra, fucking the Oriental subject and departing, having impregnated the host, and propelling her to a despair that eventually kills. The metaphor carries over for what sounds, promiscuously enough, a classic military strategy: rotation, not occupation; movement, not garrisoned entrenchment. To that end, it follows that the US does not occupy Australia so much as penetrate it with convenience, use it, and discard if and when needed, all pimp, and occasionally reassuring plunderer.

In 2014, US **President Barack Obama** fluted his views about the Pacific and the future role of US forces on a visit to Australia, yet another notch on the belt of the imperium's move into the Asia-Pacific.

"By the end of this decade, a majority of our Navy and Air Force fleets will be based out of the Pacific, because the United States is and always will be a Pacific power."

In 2015, **Admiral Jonathan Greenert** did his little Pinkerton expedition to Darwin, hoping to find suitable environs to seed further. The US, [in his words](#), was "doing a study together with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to see what might be feasible for naval co-operation in and around Australia which might include basing ships". (The horny Lothario must always sound cooperative and consultative.)

A [new port facility](#), planned to be situated at the Glyde Point area, has been one part of this

potentially dubious harvest. The intention here is to broaden the scope of naval operations, with the port intended for amphibious war ships, while providing comfort to the rotating marine force. The Australian Defence Department, as is its wont, refuses to confirm this, [telling](#) the country's national broadcaster that it had, at present "no plans for the development of a new naval facility in the Northern Territory." The evidence suggests otherwise, given the completion of the recent \$40 million road to Gunn Point, near Glyde Point. (The road to militarism tends to have good paving.)

A few mutterings are available from the Australian Defence Force. A [spokesman explained](#), noting additions to the infrastructure, that,

"The [fuel storage] facility will support training and enable enhance cooperation between the Australian Defence Force and the US Marine Corps and US Air Force."

It has been a touch under a decade since US marines began arriving in Darwin, all part of the Obama administration's desire to pivot the imperium. In 2018, Washington sent a contingent of 1,500 soldiers as part of the **US-Australian force posture agreement**, an understanding said to continue till 2040. The [national interest analysis](#) of the agreement reads like an authorising document for occupation, however described. Weasel assurances are present to give the reader the false impression of Australian independence; there would be, for instance, "respect for Australian sovereignty and the laws of Australia", the need to agree to consultation "and affirms that the initiatives will occur at Australian facilities, consistent with our long-standing policy that there are no foreign military bases on Australian soil."

Such a position [did not fool](#) Nick Deane of the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network, an organisation that continues to promote the dangers of a continuing US military presence on the continent.

"Having foreign troops on home territory creates a potential breach in any sovereign nation's defence. The first criterion of independence has to be the nation's capacity to look after itself by conducting its own defence."

The presence of foreign troops should only be countenanced in "the most extreme of situations". Those had hardly presented themselves, despite the usual psychic pressings posed by a rejigged version of the Yellow Peril.

Groups such as IPAN, along with a few defence contrarians such as Mike Gilligan, [argue](#) that Australia simply does not need this added presence for peace of mind, being more than capable of dealing with its own security.

Australia's problems have been amplified by another player in the cramped boudoir. The People's Republic of China is also sniffing, perusing and seeking a foothold. Darwin's port was leased to Landbridge Industry Australia, a subsidiary of Shandong Landbridge Group in 2015, which might have been regarded as more than just a tease. Such foreplay did not impress various critics at the time, including the then federal treasurer, **Scott Morrison**.

“They didn’t tell us about it!” he is noted [to have said](#). “Which Australian city controversially leased their port to a Chinese company in 2015?”

Strategy wonks were baffled; this move on the part of the Northern Territory government did not tally.

It would be convenient to deem the Northern Territory government a convenient whipping boy in this whole business. Australia, thus far, is proving an erratic courtesan on all fronts, happy to provide coal to Beijing in abundance with a certain amoral confidence but abstinent and circumspect on technology. (Its directions to remain firm against Beijing from Washington regarding Huawei and 5G are clear enough.)

Canberra is also rebuffing various efforts being made by the PRC in the Pacific. The Australian heart remains firmly, perhaps suicidally, in Washington’s embrace, but its politics remains scrambled. Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s [recent megaphone tour](#) of the Solomon Islands was meant to be a signal to China that the Pacific remained Canberra’s neighbourhood watch zone and, by virtue of that, a US playground by proxy. Pinkertonism is a hard thing to shake.

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