

The Emergence of 'Offshore Asia' as a Security Concept

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As the dust settles following the November 16 announcement by President Obama of the imminent stationing of U.S. marine forces in northern Australia, it is perhaps time to step back and assess what this statement might augur for the broader East Asian region in the longer term.

U.S. engagement with the East Asian region has been obviously stepped up in recent years. Summing up the new agenda in an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled 'America's Pacific Century,' Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provided us with the slogan: "Just as Asia is critical to America's future, an engaged America is vital to Asia's future." The goals of increased involvement were manifested in the launching of the Lower Mekong Initiative in 2009 as well as more recent interactions with East Asian states including Clinton's visit to Myanmar, President Obama's participation in the ASEAN Summit in Bali and U.S. promotion of the Trans Pacific Partnership. During his November trip to Australia, the President also underlined this strategy: "With my visit, I am making it clear that the U.S. is stepping up its commitment to the entire Asia-Pacific region."

While neither Australia nor the United States is willing to state which side proposed the stationing of U.S. troops near Darwin, it can be affirmed that the strengthening of United States and Australia military and security cooperation has been obvious throughout the Obama administration. The deployment proposed will involve the transfer of at least 2,500 U.S. marines to northern Australia over the coming 5 years. At the same time, U.S. naval and air forces will also increase their presence in the northern Australia region, military exercises will be expanded and, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, these forces will obtain "permanent and constant" access to some Australian military facilities.

Given that Darwin is located but 800 kilometres from Indonesia and Timor Leste, the reaction to the announcement within the region has obviously been intently followed. China has been one of the loudest critics, suggesting that the placement of the U.S. marines in Darwin "indicated the persistence of the Cold War mentality," and that this is the "starting point for the return of US armed forces to Asia," with the aim of "sowing discord between China and ASEAN." Unsurprisingly, Japan has welcomed the move. Within Indonesia, the reactions have been somewhat more diverse, with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Defense Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro claiming that the presence of the U.S. forces "will help strengthen our forces," while Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has

warned that the action could inflame regional relations. Indonesia is currently expanding its own military cooperation with the United States, which has just offered Indonesia 24 refurbished F-16 fighter jets. The Philippines has also welcomed the new U.S. force deployment as “a stabilizing force,” while K. Shanmugam, the Foreign Minister of Singapore, which itself provides facilities to U.S. naval and air forces, advised that ASEAN nations do not want to get “caught between the competing interests” of major powers.

Even within Australia itself, there is vigorous debate. Hugh White, a professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University and a former deputy secretary of defence, avers that the deployment decision will have deep consequences for Australia's relations with China, and that “in Washington and in Beijing, this will be seen as Australia aligning itself with an American strategy to contain China.” The Australian Greens party urges Parliamentary debate on the issue claiming that Australia has now discarded its independent foreign policy.

There is no doubt what the new deployment of U.S. forces in northern Australia is in response to: Southeast Asian and Western alliance concerns about the burgeoning military and economic power of China in the region. That is to say, when all the euphemisms and rhetoric are stripped away, this is great power rivalry for influence and allies in maritime Asia.

While concerns about growing PRC engagement with Timor Leste and China’s reported proposal to eventually establish a military base in Timor are not insignificant, the Darwin base is part of a much larger regional strategy. The U.S. wants its Asian allies and those trending in that direction to know that U.S. forces are now being prepared to engage if anything occurs to threaten the peace of the Asian maritime realm. The Darwin deployment places U.S. forces far enough from Chinese missiles (at least beyond the range of intermediate-range ballistic missiles) to be comfortable but still sufficiently near to the South China Sea to be able to become swiftly involved if necessary, much faster than if they sailed from Guam or Japan. The proposed stationing of the U.S. Navy’s newest littoral combat ships in Singapore, as detailed recently by Admiral Jonathan Greenert, and the growing American naval and air force cooperation with Indonesia, serve a similar function.

What we are now seeing is the beginning of a major addition to US-led East Asian security architecture, involving the creation of a Southeast sector of the “Offshore Asia” security zone. The Northeast sector of the “Offshore Asia” security zone is already well in place with U.S. bases and facilities in mainland Japan, Okinawa, South Korea and Guam being equipped with over 80,000 service personnel and some of the most-advanced defence hardware in the world. While some of these bases are increasingly being perceived as too subject to missile attack from continental Asia, they still jointly constitute a huge military force. Establishing a military framework where a similar maritime umbrella can be created in the Southeast sector of “Offshore Asia” (including the maritime ASEAN states, Australia/New

Zealand, Papua New Guinea and some of the Pacific states) is now key to the United States for maintaining a balance of power in East Asia, and its stated aim of precluding the emergence of a hegemon in the region.

Why create a security shield just for “Offshore Asia” – the Asian maritime realm? Obviously, the seas are economic lifelines. Maintaining the security of maritime routes is essential for global commerce and this has been an oft-stated policy of the United States, even from the days of Thomas Jefferson. Further, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea continue to fester and the potential for regional military conflict has been underscored repeatedly. Maintaining some sort of security shield which includes the South China Sea certainly allows smaller claimants to be less subject to the ambitions of larger claimants. However, most importantly, the rationale for this new maritime security region lies in that the United States and its allies currently have overwhelming superiority -- and thus both strategic and tactical advantage -- in terms of maritime power. The U.S. Pacific Fleet alone comprises 180 ships, nearly 2,000 aircraft and 125,000 service personnel, providing an almost unassailable advantage over any other military force in Asia. If the United States is to maintain influence and allies in the East Asian realm it obviously sees a need to use this advantage to its fullest, and the “Offshore Asia” security shield is precisely intended to do this.

The United States appears much less well-prepared for onshore East Asian conflict. While we have moved past the absolute dichotomy of “Beijing’s continental interests and U.S. maritime capabilities,” described by Robert S. Ross a decade ago in his seminal article “Geography of the Peace,” the difference between U.S. military capacities (and perhaps willingness) to engage in battle in “Offshore Asia” and in “Onshore Asia” remains stark.

What then of the mainland Southeast Asian states? It has been observed that, over the last decade, the states of ASEAN have been increasingly dividing along the mainland/island Southeast Asia fault line. Through the Greater Mekong Subregion initiatives and with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), China has been progressively drawing unto itself the politics and economic of mainland Southeast Asia. This is being done through the creation of economic corridors on the mainland involving road networks, hydropower production and distribution facilities, telecommunication tie-ups, gas pipelines, ports, new currency arrangements, trade promotion, aid packages, increased capital investment and, most recently, Chinese high-speed rail networks linking the capitals of mainland Southeast Asian countries directly to Kunming and then on to other Chinese cities. The map below shows the ADB projection for such links (excluding the high-speed railway lines) by 2015.

2015



Map A: Asian Development Bank projections for Greater Mekong Subregion infrastructure connectivity by 2015 (excluding Chinese high-speed railway lines)

- Roads
- Telecommunications
- Power Transmission Lines

The U.S. State Department-sponsored Lower Mekong Initiative is intended in some ways to counter this trend towards the dependent incorporation of Mainland Southeast Asian polities into the Southern Chinese systems, but the efforts are far too little and obviously too late. Despite repeating the rhetoric of “ASEAN centrality” or “ASEAN as a fulcrum for regional architecture,” most parties now at least obliquely recognise that the ASEAN organisation is no longer a unity and policies toward its component parts need to be differentiated, a practice which China has long been pursuing. As such, the mainland polities appear to have been essentially “surrendered” to Onshore Asia and it now seems impractical and almost beyond possibility to include them within the immediate scope of the “Offshore Asia” security shield.

What will this new focus mean for Australia? Darwin, where the first U.S. marines will be stationed, lies close to the geographical centre of the Southeast sector of “Offshore Asia.” This northern Australian base has the added advantage of having direct access to the Indian Ocean and therefore, together with the substantial U.S. naval, air and communications facilities in Diego Garcia, provides the United States and its allies with unrivalled access to, and surveillance of, Indian Ocean maritime routes. According to initial reports, B-52 long-range strategic bombers, FA-18 fighters, C-17 transport aircraft and aerial refuelling aircraft

will be stationed at the Royal Australian Air Force Base at Tindal, about 320 kilometres southeast of Darwin. Some other reports also suggest that as part of the increased collaboration, Australia is preparing to purchase or lease Virginia-class nuclear submarines from the United States. At the same time, with China being involved in port developments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Myanmar and recently being invited "to set up a military presence" in the Seychelles, the Indian Ocean will see stepped up rivalry, and the allied forces in Darwin will thus be engaged in both northern and western maritime spheres. These forces will all operate under the "AirSea Battle" concept, an inter-service effort initiated in September 2009 by the U.S. Navy and Air Force to coordinate battle strengths.

Given the growing impetus of US-Australian defence cooperation in northern Australia, we will thus likely see a burgeoning transfer of Australian military ships, planes, and personnel into bases in north and northwest Australia, and the region will increasingly become the site of major military forces both domestic and allied. Associated with this, there will be an accelerated movement of population to this northern Australian coast and growing urbanization of the region, along with expanded commerce. Major Australian tropical cities will eventually develop along this coast. This will not of course happen overnight but, through the coming decades and centuries, the northern Australian coast will replay some of the experiences of California. That is to say, with the new movement of population onto this sparsely-populated coast, facing an ocean offering both promise and threat, increased urbanization in this novel environment will induce the emergence of new economic and social forms, enriching Australia in diverse spheres.



With Australian population centres and economic activities moving closer to Indonesia and in fact closer to all of maritime Southeast Asia, the existing political, economic, social and military linkages with these areas will inevitably become more intense, strengthening the “Offshore Asia” grouping of which they will all be a part.

It was not insignificant that the U.S. President actually took time to visit Darwin during his recent trip to Australia. The stopover was precisely intended to underline how important is to be this place and how key the Australia-U.S. alliance will be in future U.S. Asia policy. The earlier press conference in Canberra at which Julia Gillard and Barack Obama announced the Darwin deployment of U.S. marines extended for but half an hour. However, the “Offshore Asia” security strategy of which this deployment is a part promises to have huge effects on maritime Asia, including Australia, and on East Asian alliances for decades to come. Whether this strategy will be a means of long-term preservation of the peace in East Asia or will eventually be considered to constitute a *casus belli* remains, as they say, to be seen.