

19 April 2012

Escalating a major power rivalry from down under

RAMPING UP: Watch those shifts in Asia's balance of power

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DO they still expect us to think that none of this is about China? Earlier this month, Australia welcomed the first batch of United States Marines for rotational deployment in the country's Northern Territory. And a week before that, reports emerged that the Australian territory of Cocos Islands was being contemplated as a base for US surveillance flights in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

According to US Ambassador to Australia Jeffrey Bleich, "there's this kind of sexy, fun narrative that you hear from pundits and others trying to suggest this is about China, but it's not". Few people, however, are persuaded by the ambassador's denial.

Instead, there is growing concern that the strengthening of the Australia-US alliance portends a ramping up of the rivalry between the US and China.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with responding to the ongoing shifts in Asia's balance of power. Just as it is legitimate for China to build a military that matches its economic might, we should expect its neighbouring countries to try to manage the strategic risks of having a rising military power in the region.

For instance, there is little doubt that Vietnam's recent purchase of six Kilo-class submarines from Russia is meant to deter China, particularly in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. And following its present naval standoff with China in Scarborough Shoal, the Philippines will almost certainly modernise its navy and air force with greater urgency. China's strategic planners must surely have come to expect such responses in its immediate region.

Yet, there is something reckless and unnerving about how fast and how much the US military presence in Australia is expected to grow. According to Professor Hugh White of the Australian National University, the plan "amounts to the biggest expansion of American interest in military access to Australia since World War 2".

Indeed, prior to the arrival of the Marines earlier this month, the US military footprint in Australia was negligible. In the past decade, American presence under the auspices of the Australia-US alliance was probably limited to the personnel assigned to the ground control station at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, which receives data from US spy satellites that hover over the Indian Ocean (and possibly Indonesia).

So consider what is in store. By 2016, the number of US Marines is expected to grow from 180 at present to 2,500. By that stage, they would have become a full Marine Air-Ground Task Force, which means that they will have all the personnel and equipment necessary to conduct military operations independently.

At RAAF Tindal, an Australian air force base near the town of Katherine in the Northern Territory, the US is likely to station F/A-18 combat air-craft and C-17 military transport planes.

Furthermore, US aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines will make greater use of HMAS Stirling, a naval base near Perth.

And at the Cocos Islands, the US is apparently interested in deploying the Global Hawk, a high-altitude surveillance drone (though discussions about this are apparently still at an early stage).

Supporters of this plan claim that the presence of US troops in Australia will improve regional responses to natural disasters. True, the US can play a crucial role in providing emergency aid, as demonstrated during the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. But it is hard to argue that combat aircraft and submarines will have any role to play in such scenarios.

Instead, what this plan is likely to do is to raise China's suspicions that the US and its allies are laying the groundwork for an escalation of tensions -- no matter how improbable that may seem to us. In response, China will probably seek to further strengthen its military capabilities, including in the South China Sea.

And that will make it even more difficult to manage tensions in those disputed waters, which have reached dangerous peaks in recent years. In short, an expanded US military presence in Australia is likely to instigate greater mistrust in the region.

The US has played a stabilising role in Asia. And many countries wish to see the US maintain its strategic presence in the region. But some restraint is necessary, especially when an escalation of major-power rivalry is a real possibility.