

U.S. Rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific Region and the U.S.-Australia Alliance

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Introduction

In his address to Australian Parliament in November 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama powerfully declared his administration's policy intent to take a larger and long-term role in shaping the future of the Asia-Pacific region, which was later to be described as America's rebalancing policy. As specific initiatives to that end, President Obama made a joint announcement with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard regarding plans to allow the U.S. Air Force greater access to northern Australia and to allow the U.S. Marine Corps' rotational deployment in Darwin. This paper analyzes such "re-strengthening" of the U.S.-Australia alliance as seen in these new initiatives and discusses future prospects for the alliance.

Initiatives to strengthen the U.S.-Australia alliance

In November 2010, the United States and Australia held a meeting of their foreign affairs and defense ministers (Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), or the so-called Two plus Two) and announced the establishment of a bilateral working group on the U.S. Global Force Posture Review. Since the first meeting of the working group held in Australia in December 2010, the two countries have considered options for alliance cooperation concerning the U.S. Global Force Posture Review, resulting in the aforementioned announcement of joint force posture initiatives in November 2011. At the writing of this paper, the two countries remain in the process of determining specifics regarding the U.S. Air Force's greater access to northern Australia, while it has been decided that the United States will send a maximum of about 2,500 personnel from the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) from 2012 to 2017, during the dry season from April through September each year. In April 2012, Fox Company (200 to 250 Marines), who are stationed in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, were deployed to Darwin as the first contingent of the U.S. Marine Corps (they have effectively left Darwin by the end of September).

It should be noted that behind the progress in bilateral cooperation regarding the U.S. force posture review, there are at least three elements of policy convergence between the United States and Australia. First, both the U.S. Armed Forces and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are aiming to increase their engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. With the wars in the Middle East and West Asia winding down, the Obama Administration has repeatedly emphasized the fact that the United States will further increase its presence in the Asia-Pacific region. With the publication of "Defense Strategic Guidance" and "Defense Budget Priorities and Choices" in January 2012, the United States has indicated its stance of seeking "innovative, low cost, and small-footprint" approaches to achieving its security objectives, which will involve joint training and support for capacity-building, rather than an increase in

permanent bases. In the meantime, the ADF is also seeking its own “rebalancing” in a similar manner. ADF’s rebalancing is being considered in the context where Australia is moving towards a planned withdrawal of 1,550 ADF troops now deployed mostly in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan, while also considering withdrawing ADF troops participating in the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the International Stabilisation Force (ISF) in East Timor. In light of this, Defence Minister Stephen Smith has indicated that Australia will strengthen the ADF’s involvement in joint training and capacity-building support in areas closer to Australia.

In this way, the United States and Australia share similar policy trajectory towards strengthening their regional engagement, which offers a new opportunity for the two countries to further collaborate in regional engagements.. For example, the ADF which plans to introduce two amphibious assault ships (LHDs) with load displacements of 27,500 tons from 2014, should benefit greatly from increased opportunities for joint exercises with the U.S. Marine Corps in training for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) and stabilization operations using large LHDs. This will help ADF develop its capability as an active partner for the U.S. regional engagement. Furthermore U.S. and Australia are also planning to extend the cooperation by inviting other countries into their multilateral exercises. In fact, there are already ideas on the table for HA/DR training among the United States, Australia and Indonesia; or there is a suggestion for having a joint training involving the United States, Australia and China.

The second factor behind the U.S.-Australia cooperation in the U.S. Global Force Posture Review is the increasing synergy of their views on the region. In recent years, security experts in the United States and Australia are increasingly using the concept of “the Indo-Pacific region”. At the governmental level, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defence Minister Smith have also referred to this concept. While there is of course no consensus on the details of the concept of “the Indo-Pacific region”, it should be at least noted that the term “the Indo-Pacific region” is used, particularly in the context of the U.S.-Australian alliance, and that the Australian community of experts has been among the first to adopt it. It indicates that the increased recognition of the importance of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia has shed new light on the geographical value of Australia as the “island continent” facing the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. One of the objectives of the deployment of the U.S. Marine Corps to Darwin is stronger engagement in Southeast Asia, and in fact, the aforementioned Fox Company undertook joint training exercises and other activities in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. In addition, one of the options under consideration in U.S.-Australia consultations on the posture review is greater access by the U.S. Navy to the Royal Australian Navy’s Stirling naval base in Perth, Western Australia.

The third and perhaps most important factor is that the United States and Australia have the shared intention of sending a common strategic message. In his speech to the Australian Parliament, President Obama noted that most of the history of the 21st century will be centered on the Asia-Pacific region and emphasized that the United States will continue to strengthen its alliance with Australia. Furthermore, as a Pacific nation, the United States “will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.” Prime Minister Gillard also pointed out that the significance of Obama’s visit to Australia lies in the consideration of how to strengthen the bilateral alliance to deal with the region as it continues to undergo significant changes. Through these statements, two countries reaffirm the United States’ continued role in the region and their joint intent to further strengthen the alliance, in light of changes in the strategic environment, including the rise of China and India, and the spreading perception of a “power shift”

and even the decline of the United States as perceived in some quarters.

Controversies over the U.S.-Australia posture review initiatives

The U.S.-Australia force posture initiatives have been subject to a variety of policy debates. The most recent example of such is the “free rider” argument. Behind the emergence of the “free rider” criticism is the reduction in Australia’s defense budget. In May 2012, Defence Minister Smith announced plans to cut the country’s defense spending by 971 million Australian dollars in fiscal 2012-2013 and by a total of 5.454 billion Australian dollars by fiscal 2015-2016 as part of measures to eliminate federal budget deficits (The Australian Strategic Policy Institute reports that, as a result, the defense budget has declined to 1.56% of gross domestic product (GDP) for the first time since 1938). Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage criticized Australia’s budget cuts, saying that while the United States maintains its commitments to the alliance and the region, Australia is reducing its defense spending by free riding off the United States. Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, who visited Australia in July, stated that in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States expects alliance partners to have a defense budget equivalent to 2% of GDP. The Australian media took keen notice of Locklear’s remarks, perceiving it to be a criticism of Australia’s defense budget, which falls short of 2% of GDP.

Indeed one could contend that the “free rider” criticisms cannot be dismissed as a merely meaningless proposition as they at least help remind us of the importance to consider possible ramifications of the defense budget cuts upon the alliance. On the other hand, the argument of Australia free-riding on the alliance is somewhat a narrow account for the following two reasons. First, the “free rider” argument underestimates the fact that Australia is in close contacts with the U.S. ally on the policy issues including the defense budget cuts. When questions are raised about the “free rider” criticisms, Defence Minister Smith often states that the United States understands Australia’s defense spending reduction, noting that U.S. Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, has stated that the “new reality” in defense budgets amid the severe fiscal conditions is a common problem facing the United States, Australia and many other countries. In this sense, those who make the free-rider argument should take into account the fact that U.S. and Australia both face a similar fiscal challenge and understand the difficult situation of each other..

Secondly, the “free rider” theory places too much emphasis on defense budgets as the benchmark for the level of the alliance cooperation. As described above, in view of the fact that in the near future, the ADF is set to complete several major operations, Australia is exploring ways to redirect its resources and attentions to strengthen its involvement particularly in the Asia-Pacific region or the Indo-Pacific region going forward. In this context, it is necessary to go beyond the narrow view of paying attention only to the size of defense budgets but the observers should also closely follow how the alliance seeks to expand regional involvement even amid budget reductions. In fact, the force posture initiatives announced in November 2011 allow the two countries to seek ways to strengthen their involvement in regional affairs without incurring huge expenditures by pursuing such measures as the use of remodeled ADF facilities by the U.S. Armed Forces and the invitation of other countries in the region to U.S.-Australia joint training. To sum up, the “free rider” theory is a narrow-minded perspective that ignores progress in U.S.-Australian cooperation or the close policy communication between the United States and Australia.

Future prospects

The analysis of U.S.-Australian cooperation set forth in this paper remains at best preliminary by nature because of the following two reasons. First, there remains a possibility that the two countries may announce initiatives for enhancing the U.S.-Australia alliance on an ongoing basis going forward. For instance, the bilateral working group established for the posture review is still very much in operation, and on top of the force posture initiatives that it has already announced, it is likely to come up with new initiatives, such as the U.S. Navy's greater access to Stirling naval base and the joint use of the Cocos Islands, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, in the future. In addition, the Australian Ministry of Defence is now also working on a new defense white paper for completion by around the first half of 2013 with the intention of further consolidating its policy regarding the posture review Australia has to tackle going forward. Furthermore, both the United States and Australia have announced plans to strengthen not just their bilateral collaborations but also invite regional countries including Indonesia to take part of the joint training.

Second, for a comprehensive assessment of U.S.-Australian cooperation, it is also necessary to shed light on risks the United States and Australia may face going forward. This is because whether the "rebalancing" by the United States and Australia will progress smoothly and cooperation within the U.S.-Australia alliance will move forward successfully depends on whether the military operations the two countries are currently engaged in, particularly reconstruction and stabilization in Afghanistan, will proceed smoothly. If the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, it could have a negative impact on the "rebalancing" by the two countries and their alliance. Further reductions in the defense budgets of the United States and Australia, should it happen, could also lead to a fundamental review of their defense policies.

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