

Marrickville Peace Group

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Senator the Hon. Marise Payne
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
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November 6, 2017

Dear Senator Payne

After a long period of silence on the matter, Marrickville Peace Group (MPG) wishes to return to the topic of US marines being stationed in Darwin. In January, 2016 MPG asked you:-

“Can you provide some rational explanation for the presence of US marines on Australian territory, in terms of Australia’s strategic defence?”

The group received in response a letter from Mr Angus Kirkwood (Reference IPDIV (S)/OUT/2016/10, dated May 4, 2016), to which MPG replied directly in June 2016.

MPG appreciated receiving Mr Kirkwood’s letter and acknowledges that it does attempt to answer the group’s question.

Our reading of Mr Kirkwood’s argument is that Australia relies on the USA to provide stability in the region and that it maintains a strong alliance with the US for that purpose. From this position it is implied that the presence of US marines in Darwin, because it strengthens the alliance, increases regional stability and is therefore of strategic benefit to Australia.

We see significant flaws in this line of argument.

Following the Kirkwood argument could justify *any* development or action that strengthens the alliance, which would then automatically be considered to be of strategic benefit to Australia. This is an excessively narrow approach. It fails to take into consideration any matter other than the alliance – as if it is *only* through the alliance that Australia can remain secure. It tends to exclude all other considerations, whereas there are, in fact, other ways through which Australia’s security can be maintained.

We do not dispute the evident fact that the presence of the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) and increased use of airport facilities by US aircraft enhance the alliance. What is in question is whether this is actually to Australia’s strategic advantage (we are convinced that it is not). Further strengthening Australia’s alliance with the US does not guarantee a strategic benefit to our nation, in each and every case. Australia’s alliance with the USA is already strong and could remain strong *with or without* a US MAGTF in Darwin. In this case, we can see no strategic benefit. Discussion of the importance of the alliance is not sufficient to explain any benefit bestowed by the presence of the US marines. Our question has not yet received a satisfactory answer.

MPG finds it perplexing that the Australian Government does not have at its fingertips persuasive arguments with which to answer our question. It would have expected that there was some special rationale for this particular development.

- Why was this specific course of action decided upon?
- In what direct way does having the US MAGTF in Darwin enhance Australia’s strategic position?

An important point needs to be made here. Within any alliance, allowing or inviting the military forces of a foreign, partner nation to be routinely stationed on a host nation's territory takes the nature of that alliance to an entirely new and different level. Such hosting could indicate the host nation's inability to look after its own defence; it might indicate that the host feels some immediate threat, or it might signify a severe lack of equality within the partnership.

Allowing US marines, the military forces of a foreign country, to be stationed on Australian territory represents, without doubt, an extraordinary, new departure. Being part of the alliance is one thing. It has a very strong, qualitative difference to actually hosting the armed forces of the alliance partner. Unless there are extreme circumstances, which there are not in this instance, taking such a step requires special explanation.

MPG would also, in any case, question the assertion that the levels of security and stability that Australia seeks in the Indo-Pacific would not be achievable without the United States. We view the expanding presence of US military forces to actually have a *destabilising* impact that *increases* the risk of military confrontation. It is arguable that the ongoing presence of US forces in South Korea, and the military exercises that repeatedly take place there, have constrained North Korea to urgently seek means to deter the possibility of the sort of destruction it suffered from US bombing in the 1950s. Likewise, China's militarisation of islands in the South China Sea can be seen as a legitimate, defensive response to the USA's 'pivot' to the Asia Pacific.

From the perspective of countries that are not allies of the US, that country's actions may be seen as overly aggressive and actually threatening. Why does the US consider it necessary to 'defend' itself by establishing military positions thousands of kilometres from its home territory, all over the globe and including on the Western edges of the Pacific Ocean? How threatened might the US feel, if some foreign power, China or Russia for example, were to establish military bases off the coast of Mexico or Canada?

It is against this background that the stationing of US marines in Darwin should be viewed. In the eyes of other nations, the 'rotational presence' of the marines is yet one more instance of the United States aggressively projecting its power, far from home. The presence of the marines simply emphasises Australia's enmeshment within the US's military structure – and thus tends to make this country the enemy of any nation that fears US military might. In other words, it creates enemies for Australia, where we need have none. In the final analysis, then, the presence of the marines actually increases the risk that we might face some attack. This can hardly be called a strategic benefit.

On the other hand, it is easy to see strategic benefits that accrue to the United States. It has an MAGTF conveniently and safely ready for whatever military action it may choose to engage in, at a location much closer to areas of potential conflict than is the USA mainland. The presence of the marines doubtless improves the prospect of 'full spectrum dominance'.

To summarise, stationing US marines in Darwin increases the risk that Australia becomes the target for an attack, whilst assisting the USA in its global, military ambitions. Support for the alliance is one thing. Serving the interests of the United States at the expense of Australia's own interests is quite another. At the very least, it requires more detailed explanation than has been forthcoming so far.

Yours sincerely

Nick Deane
for Marrickville Peace Group.