

US military base in Darwin a threat?

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Despite reducing its defense spending and its engagement in two wars, the United States promises to establish a new permanent military base in Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia.

US President Barack Obama unveiled the plan during his visit to one of the US' counterparts and solid allies in Asia Pacific last week.

The announcement obviously surprised ASEAN leaders, as well as China, as they were about to gather for their summit in Bali.

Although Obama did not mention China, many observers perceive the military base has something to do with China's rise economically and militarily in the region.

There were at least two reasons cited by Obama to justify the new military base in the Asia-Pacific region. First, is to maintain its ties with Australia, and the second is to enhance its economic development by pursuing cooperation with states in the region.

President Obama plans to set up the US military base in Darwin as America wants to deepen and strengthen its military alliance with Australia.

He aims to fulfill this by arranging a new defense pact with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Therefore, first and foremost, this military base is an implementation of the strategic ties between the US and Australia.

The US-Australian defense agreement is mainly aimed at maintaining and updating US and Australia's security ties that have spanned 60 years.

However, this strengthening of ties may signal the US' comeback from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region.

This confirms that the US is willing to play a greater role in the region to counterbalance China's assertiveness.

Furthermore, an increasing US presence in the region is fulfilling its pledge to protect both its national interests as well as their allies'. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Washington would give more military support to Southeast Asian countries, mainly the Philippines, in the wake of conflicting claims over the South China Sea against China.

The US military presence in Darwin will be implemented with the gradual deployment of war planes, military equipment and 2,500 mariners in Darwin in the coming years.

Obviously, Indonesia's Foreign Minister has viewed this alliance as a reaction toward

China's rise (The Jakarta Post, Nov. 19, 2011). Many observers perceive the same since this situation perfectly describes the action-reaction model by Barry Buzan in his book, *The Arms Dynamic in World Politics* (1998).

Recently, China bought its first multi-role aircraft carrier from Russia in August. The Chinese government did this in accordance with its economic development and the increase in its military spending.

This is not to mention the recent deployment of more advanced Chinese missiles recently on the Indian border, which raised the US' concerns about China's attempts to strengthen its deterrence posture and become more aggressive in the region over the past decade.

Interestingly, as written in its defense paper, which was published in March 2010, the Chinese government legitimized its strategy for territorial and sovereignty purposes. This strategy is essential for China due to boundary problems with its neighbors.

The Chinese government still has to address the political problem with Taiwan, as well as several border disputes with India, Japan and some ASEAN member countries in relation to South China Sea claims.

China's defense paper may confirm that it has no intention of challenging America's military. However, its military strategy may provoke tensions with the US' allies, primarily Japan and the Philippines, and create instability which would prompt the US to increase its presence in the region.

Second, Obama explicitly said the US-Australia pact was intended to protect commercial traffic in the Pacific, which is essential for Washington. Like his predecessors, Reagan and Clinton, Obama reemphasized the vital role of the Asia-Pacific region for the US' economic development.

Moreover, Obama used the opportunity of the East Asia Summit last week to convey US willingness to deepen and strengthen its participation in the entire Asia Pacific.

To demonstrate its seriousness, the US also participated in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and pushed for another free trade alliance called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This agreement was also enhanced with the US' Pacific counterparts, excluding China and Indonesia, five days before the defense pact was announced.

The TPP includes four ASEAN countries: Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei Darussalam, as well as Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Peru.

The economy does matter; in his book *Seapower* (2009), Geoffrey Till writes that globalization, which brings transnational economic free trade will, in turn, become a major determinant of military strategy and defense policy.

He believes that globalization depends absolutely on the free flow of sea-based shipping and this obviously needs military forces to guard the lanes.

For this reason, US naval strategy has to be assured that its ships, both for commercial and military purposes, have access to any sea in the name of freedom of navigation.

This is important, as international shipping is not free from all disruptions.

The vulnerability of the Asia-Pacific region may come from states as well as non states. Conflict and instability both ashore and at sea; the domination by certain states in particular seas; and international terrorism, or other group threats, such as piracy, drugs, weapons and people smuggling, which occur in the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait, have become yet more reasons for the US to place its military base in Australia.

Nonetheless, the action-reaction involving the US and China, and a greater role played by the US in the region, is less likely to support stability and economic development in Asia Pacific.

There are at least three reasons to support this view.

First, the arms dynamic will drag the region toward a security dilemma. In this situation, most of the region's states will perceive either China or the US as a threat, as happened with Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Second, the absence of security and stability in the region will in turn exacerbate the problem regarding expeditionary operations. And finally, the US' implementation of freedom of navigation, both for economic and military purposes, will irritate coastal states in the region, mainly Indonesia.

Thus, the US needs to be cautious and transparent in implementing such a military strategy in Australia so that none of the Asia-Pacific states will feel vulnerable. On the other hand, ASEAN needs to bridge the two world powers in the region while accommodating its member states' interests.

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