

# FDI Feature Interview

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## Darwin's Importance to US Asia-Pacific Strategy

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### Key Points

- As part of the US realignment to the Asia-Pacific, the US and Australia have agreed to upgrade defence cooperation by deploying US rotational forces to Darwin to strengthen interoperability and engage in joint-training exercises with Australian and Southeast Asian forces.
- Darwin's strategic location shall also enable US forces to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations when required.
- Given Darwin's capacity to provide amphibious and shipping access, it will also serve as a useful focal point for US capacity-building assistance to the Australian Army, which is currently in the process of developing amphibious capabilities.

### Summary

As part of the US Government's landmark decision late last year to strategically refocus to the Asia-Pacific, **Lieutenant General Duane Thiessen**, who heads Marine Forces Pacific, or MarForPac, spoke to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** in mid-December last year, about the re-emergence of Australia in US regional strategic calculations and the intensified US commitment to the ANZUS Treaty and the Asia Pacific.

## Commentary

‘We have had an alliance for 60 years that is committed to global and regional security,’ said General Thiessen. ‘The US President and the Australian Prime Minister have both agreed to enhance cooperation. The new arrangement will not negate or substitute the smaller and larger pre-existing military-to-military exercises that we already do on a routine basis with Australia. Those will all continue as I see it,’ he said.

‘As anyone who has been to the Northern Territory would know, the training ranges adjacent to Darwin are world class. The Bradshaw Range is a huge field to conduct manoeuvre and conventional training exercises. There aren’t many places in the world where we can do that type of training. Darwin is also located in an opportune place as it will also give us the ability to conduct additional training with other Southeast Asian countries.’

The deployment of marines to Darwin shall commence in mid-2012 and will initially consist of approximately 250 marines. By 2014, however, US forces in Darwin are expected to increase upwards of 1,000 personnel and will ultimately plateau at 2,500 troops by around 2016-2017.

The General further explained: ‘The US forces that deploy to Darwin will be a combination of rotational forces from within and from outside MarForPac. In other words we will go there, operate and then leave. Starting with rotational forces the deployment in Darwin will be along a Marine Air Ground Task Force, or MAGTAF, construct. As we phase into this agreement we intend to increase the size and the duration of the deployments to Australia. Eventually, we intend to deploy a MAGTAF in northern Australia along the lines of a battalion with logistics and rotary wing support.’

Although the presence of large US forces in Darwin will provide enhanced opportunities to engage in regional activities, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, a key emphasis of the US deployment will focus on joint-training exercises with the Australian military and other allied regional forces.

‘The mutual benefit is irrefutable,’ affirmed General Thiessen. ‘In Darwin we will have two forces going into a common training environment, which will improve our relationship, understanding, techniques and procedures. ‘We get to watch each other to see what works, sort out difficult points and harmonise our forces in a more intensive way. Darwin also offers amphibious and shipping access, which is useful as the Australian Army is developing and upgrading its own amphibious capability.’

He added: ‘We are now in the process of developing the interoperability arrangements. I am about to deploy a liaison team to Canberra and a coordination team to Darwin to start developing the day-to-day logistics arrangements and the common training objectives. I consider this agreement to be a huge step forward for both the United States and Australia.’

In a policy that has also been referred to as “America’s Pacific Century”, the US decision to strategically realign significant diplomatic, economic and military resources over the next decade reflects the continued pre-eminence of the Asia-Pacific region in world affairs, particularly with the rise of China.

'The United States has an increased interest in the Asia-Pacific. As we draw down in Afghanistan there is an opportunity for us to refit and reequip and bring more equipment into the Pacific. MarForPac has two Marine Expeditionary Forces, or MEFs, under its purview. We will have more Marines in the Pacific to exercise through 1 MEF and 3 MEF all our engagement and presence responsibilities. The 1 MEF is headquartered in California and 3 MEF is headquartered in Japan.

'In no way has the US Marine Corps left its amphibious roots. The US Marine Corps is light, flexible and amphibious and is a force that can move throughout the region and be effective across a scale of contingencies, including the inherent capability if required to work in a non-combat capacity.

'Not only have we continued our amphibious legacy and capability, we have developed it and are continuing to further do so. The entire time that we have been engaged in both Iraq and Afghanistan, we have deployed the 31<sup>st</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Units, or MEUs, each either operating in, or at least transiting through, the Pacific.

'MarForPac has continued to engage in amphibious training in a real world construct with our partners throughout Asia such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. For instance, we recently completed a joint amphibious landing exercise with the Philippines. There have also been other examples such as the USS *Tortuga*, which dispatched marines and sailors to Thailand to assist in flood relief.'

In conclusion, General Thiessen emphasised: 'The regional impact of the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Pacific is incredible and plays large in all our calculations when we look at our capabilities to engage and respond. The Pacific is huge and it is dominated by water, which means that mobility has unique strategic challenges that are both naval and amphibious in character.' he said.

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