The Impact of Foreign Military Involvement on the Development of Northern Australia

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Key Points

- Foreign forces have a history of land use for the military training extending back to World War II.
- Allowing foreign defence forces to access Australian military establishments and field training ranges is fundamental to maintaining regional security and long-standing strategic alliances.
- Expenditure by foreign forces visiting northern Australia has had significant impact on local economies, which will grow exponentially due to increasing numbers of personnel over extended periods.
- Environmental risks relating to land clearing, infrastructure development and military operations are mitigated through robust management and control systems.
- Social impacts of visiting foreign forces have been negligible where troops have been permitted to interact with local communities.

Summary

Globally, governments are under increasing pressure to allocate ever scarcer land resources while taking account of economic outcomes, environmental sustainability and social benefits. Food production, mineral resource extraction, tourism, industrial infrastructure and urban development are just some of the essential activities that compete for land. Similarly, airspace is becoming increasingly crowded as the demand for travel and trade increase.

One less obvious, but also important use of land, sea and airspace, is military training. Australia, with its large area, relatively small population and its geographical positioning on the periphery of principle sea and air trade routes, is uniquely placed as it still has sufficient land and airspace available where it can
adequately meet the demands detailed above and can still allocate land for large military training areas, particularly in the north.

During World War Two, Australia provided training areas to the United States to support the conflict in the Pacific. The United States has continued to conduct military training on Australian soil and airspace to the present day. The United Kingdom conducted 12 major nuclear weapon’s tests in Australia between 1952 and 1957. More recently, regional neighbours have been provided permanent training facilities, particularly for pilot training. These arrangements provide both benefits and costs to Australia. They invest in infrastructure, provide employment to the local workforce and inject money into local economies. They can also be environmentally and culturally disruptive and can prevent land use for other purposes. The negative aspects of permanent, foreign military bases in Australia notwithstanding, they can be used strategically as a development tool for northern Australia.

**Analysis**

**Current Situation**

Australia has an established history of hosting foreign defence forces. During the Second World War, there was extensive appropriation of land to be used for US military bases and field training areas to support the War in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. After the War, much of this land was returned to previous owners though some was retained for management by various government bodies, including the Australian Defence Force (ADF). During the 1960s saw large areas of land, particularly in Queensland, were acquired for training and exercising to prepare for deployments to Vietnam. Since the Vietnam War, foreign force’s use of these training areas increased significantly and now American, Singaporean and other defence forces have become regular visitors to Australia to conduct training.

The **Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA)** which came into force in 1971 enables participation in combined field exercises by the military forces of Malaysia, Singapore, United Kingdom and New Zealand. Since that time, many thousands of foreign defence personnel have come to Australia to participate in field training activities, including deployment of armour, artillery field firing, combat engineering and construction as well as demolitions. The original FPDA has gradually expanded to include combined and joint exercises using naval and air forces from the five member countries.

Through formal agreements with the United States, the US Air Force, Marines Corps(USMC) and, to a lesser extent the US Army, have made extensive use of Australian facilities and field training areas to conduct training not possible in the United States or elsewhere. This is mainly due to the availability of space. Modern, long-range weapon systems, such a tank main armament, artillery and air-delivered weapons require large engagement and safety distances, which are available in remote regions of northern Australia.

Training areas in northern Australia currently in use by US and FPDA forces are located in Darwin, Katherine, Mount Bundy and Bradshaw in the Northern Territory. To a limited extent, field training is also undertaken in Western Australia. Since 1990, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and USMC have made extensive use of Shoalwater Bay, near Rockhampton, and training areas close to Townsville in Queensland.

The USMC started permanent, six-month rotations of 1,100 personnel, based in Darwin, in 2011. This contingent uses training areas and facilities in several locations in the region. The success of this arrangement has been significant. The programme extends US military’s presence into the Asia-Pacific region, which is strategically important for both countries.
Future Plans

The successful basing of USMC personnel in Darwin has led to a 25-year cost sharing agreement which came into force on 31 March 2015. Significantly, under this agreement, the contingent will be increased to a Marine Expeditionary Unit (approximately 2,500) sized organisation with supporting elements. Accordingly, the US plans to spend US$3 billion on infrastructure at Robertson Barracks in Darwin to provide accommodation as well as upgrading industrial and technical facilities on the Base. At RAAF Bases Darwin and Tindal near Katherine, project works to strengthen runways and address limitations on fuel storage will be carried out.

Taking advantage of the northern Australian dry season, the USMC will also regularly use the Bradshaw training area (south-west of Darwin) which is three times the size of training areas available in the US. This approach will enable and facilitate training exercises and live-fire engagement practices that cannot normally be achieved due to safety considerations.

In October 2016, agreements were reached in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the governments of Australia and Singapore, providing SAF access to, and the expansion of, dedicated military training areas. This enhanced defence co-operation would commit Singapore to an investment of $2.34 billion over the next 25 years to develop a new Townsville Field Training Area (TFTA). This would require the acquisition of 200,000 hectares of land, south-west of Townsville (near the township of Charters Towers). Also planned were facilities for combined arms and field live firing range practices as well as urban operations. Construction was expected to start in 2019.

The area identified for this training area, however, is currently used for cattle grazing, and the possibility of forced acquisition of productive, long term family properties caused considerable concern in the local community. Initially, forced land acquisitions and re-location to suitable grazing lands elsewhere was not
ruled out. Recent announcements by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Barnaby Joyce, MP, however, stated that compulsory acquisition of farms in Queensland will not occur.

Combined with the new TFTA, expenditure will also target an increased usage of the existing Shoalwater Bay Training Area. This would see an increase of the number of SAF troops deploying to Australia from 6,600 for six weeks, to 14,000 for 18 weeks each year, together with their vehicles and supporting equipment.

**Impacts of Future Foreign Involvement**

The actual and perceived impact of permanent, foreign military training areas on Australian soil is broad and can be complex. The main issues these facilities raise are discussed below.

**Environmental Impacts**

From an environmental viewpoint, the establishment of new training areas and expansion of existing field training facilities, combined with an influx of large numbers of troops together with their vehicles and equipment, can impact both negatively and positively.

Alterations to landform and soil erosion may result as a consequence of constructing roads, airstrips and range infrastructure which will involve a degree of land clearing for earthworks. Fragile soils that have been cleared of vegetation may erode into waterways, resulting in increased sedimentation. Additionally, high-explosive ordnance and the manoeuvre of tracked vehicles may result in a de-stabilisation of the ground surface, leading to soil erosion. The use of formed gravel roads for vehicle movement not directly involved in training exercises, and minimising vehicle and human disturbance by establishing management zones, will mitigate the threat of soil erosion.

De-stocking of cattle from grazing properties could result in a consequential increase of weed species as grazing cattle will consume weeds in their diet. Additionally, there is a threat that non-native seeds might be introduced into the area in the large number of military vehicles accessing the training area. A further risk relates the potential impact of de-stocking of grazing properties and a consequential increasing in available feed and a resultant increase in feral grazing animals. As well, there are potential effects on flora and fauna by turning land over to military field training: the chance Queensland endangered species such as the bridled nail-tail wallaby and the bilby, could be further threatened due to habitat loss from land clearing to build infrastructure. Military operations may also impact bird species from high explosives disturbing bird habitats and destroying nesting trees.

Of significance, the ADF has a long history of implementing and maintaining stringent environmental controls to closely manage and safeguard military field training areas, many of which contain remnant flora and ‘at risk’ fauna species. Those controls include usage by visiting foreign forces. The other positive enhancement from good environmental management will be a reduction on the burden for State and local governmental agencies to manage and provide oversight due to the ADF’s ongoing commitments to sustainability and a strong record of responsible environmental management.

**Social Impacts**

A report relating to [USMC rotations into the NT](#) commissioned by the ADF in 2012, identified 29 indices where the impacts of personnel living and working in the community would ‘limited’ to ‘negligible’ and that moreover, ‘the nature of their activities while in the NT, indicate relatively little interaction between USMC personnel and the NT population and/or community services’. The limited interaction between the Darwin community and the USMC has resulted in positive outcomes: US personnel have undertaken community volunteering by mentoring troubled teens in detention and involvement has also been with the Red Cross
in blood donations, assisting with Meals on Wheels and visits to schools to carry out ground maintenance as well as participation in community projects.

In respect to the increase of SAF personnel into northern Queensland or elsewhere, interaction between service personnel and the civilian populace will be severely limited as the soldiers, on military exercise, will not have leisure time or leave that would allow or enable them to visit local townships.

![Figure 2](source_url) Training in Australia will enable foreign forces to operate in unfamiliar terrain and conditions. Source: Singapore Army, Flickr.

**Infrastructure and Employment**

The pastoral industry is a cornerstone of agriculture in northern Australia. It provides tens of thousands of jobs in regional, rural and remote communities. Landowner fears of losing grazing lands that have been in their families for generations, understandably, raise considerable consternation in regional communities. Concern is also raised that training area expansion could turn their local communities into ‘ghost towns’. The recent announcements by the Deputy Prime Minister ruling out the compulsory acquisition of farms in Queensland should calm some of these fears.

Community concerns, notwithstanding, studies into the social and economic impacts of defence activities in Queensland noted that opposite outcomes are often true. For instance, community groups have responded positively to the injection of money by international visitors on shopping for general commodities, accommodation, entertainment and alcohol. Additionally, local businesses and contractors were regularly engaged to provide services such as construction of infrastructure, transportation services (buses), food and beverage supplies and, local employment resulting in service provision such as caretaker, maintenance and waste management services, drivers and caterers. The studies concluded that the local economies of towns such as Rockhampton benefited greatly, signifying that a future dedicated training would likewise result in social and economic advantages for local country towns and the local population. This would be an important outcome as Defence activities in other regions are seen as a supporter of local businesses as well as a catalyst for improved infrastructure spending, resulting in job creation and employment diversity.
Finance

Visiting foreign forces have a direct positive economic impact on the vast region of northern Australia, as described by Deloitte Access Economics. The Deloitte research identified in the NT in 2014, the rotation of up to 1,100 USMC personnel and their associated equipment, equalled expenditure of $5,091 per Marine. In central Queensland an ADF study also reported that during a six-year period (2003-2008) an injection into the local economy averaging $1,871 per SAF soldier and $2885 per American serviceman was realised. These figures quoted demonstrate a massive potential for the region of northern Australia to benefit significantly from enabling foreign forces to continue to conduct their military field training exercises on Australian soil.

Conclusion

The 2015 Government White Paper, Our North, Our Future: Developing Norther Australia, stated that the Federal Government will address challenges to northern development by:

- making it easier to use natural assets, in close consultation with, and the support of, Indigenous communities;
- providing a more welcoming investment environment;
- investing in infrastructure to lower business and household costs;
- reducing barriers to employing people; and
- improving governance.

It is acknowledged that for some of these challenges, permanent foreign military facilities may compete unsuccessfully with other land-use activities. It has the potential, however, with the appropriate planning and implementation, to make a constructive contribution. In return for military training areas, foreign governments have shown a willingness to invest billions of dollars by providing infrastructure, finance, employment and promoting a diversification in a local workforce beyond what is possible from local investment alone. It is a development option that must be seriously considered.

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