

Department of Defence

Budget Estimates Hearing – 2 & 3 June 2014

Question on Notice No. 55 - US Marines in Darwin

Senator Rhiannon provided in writing:

In answer to my February 2014 estimates question of “why are US marines routinely stationed in Darwin?” I was provided with the answer: “On 16 November 2011, the then Prime Minister Gillard and President Obama announced two force posture initiatives: rotational US Marine Corps deployments and increased rotations of US Air Force aircraft in northern Australia.” May I have actual details please:

- (1) For what strategic reasons did Australia agree to the ‘rotational deployment’ of US marines to Australian territory in November 2011, especially when there is no military threat to Australia?
- (2) What is the reason for this departure from previous practice?
- (3) How will the Australian government respond if the US marines deployed to Darwin engage in military action somewhere in our region? May I please have details.
- (4) Bearing in mind the fact that, according to a Ministerial Statement of June 26 2013, ‘Full Knowledge and Concurrence’ does not mean that Australia approves every activity undertaken, has the Australian government sought an assurance from the US government that the marines deployed to Darwin will not take part in any military action in our region without prior approval from the Australian government?
 - (a) If such an assurance has not been sought, will the government seek it?
 - (b) If not, why not?
- (5) The US has gained a ‘forward position’ for its military forces when they make use of Australian facilities, giving that country considerable strategic advantage. What strategic benefit accrues to Australia from these arrangements?
- (6) Is ex-PM Malcolm Fraser correct in suggesting that the presence of the US forces places Australia at risk?
 - (a) Where is he wrong in this analysis?

Response

(1) and (2) Australia’s alliance with the United States (US) remains vital to our security and defence arrangements. The initiatives are an extension of Australia’s existing defence cooperation and arrangements and are consistent with Australia’s longstanding strategic interests in supporting US engagement in the Asia-Pacific in a manner that promotes peace and stability. The initiatives provide tangible benefits to Australia through enhanced Australian Defence Force training opportunities and improved-interopability with US forces. These initiatives are about improving cooperation between Australia, the US, and other countries in the region.

- (3) It would be inappropriate to speculate on hypotheticals.

(4) (a) and (b) Full Knowledge & Concurrence is an expression of Australian sovereignty; of Australia's fundamental right to know what activities foreign governments conduct in, through or from Australian territory or national assets.

The activities at all Australian Defence facilities, including Australia's joint facilities and those to which the US has access, are managed in a manner which is consistent with Australia's national interests.

(5) Australia supports the continued commitment of the US to the Asia-Pacific and sees continued US engagement as essential to its continued peace, security and prosperity. The US has underwritten stability in the Asia-Pacific for more than 60 years, and it is Australia's view that the US will continue to be the most influential global actor for the foreseeable future.

It is in Australia's national interest for the US to be active and engaged in our region as economic, political and military influence shifts towards it. Australia welcomes the opportunities the US rebalance brings for greater collaboration between defence partners to build regional cooperation and capacity. These initiatives are about improving cooperation between Australia, the US, and other countries in the region. They are not directed at any other country.

(6) (a) The US force posture initiatives are an extension of our existing defence cooperation and arrangements. These are consistent with Australia's longstanding strategic interests in supporting US engagement in our region in a manner that promotes peace and stability.