

Northern Territory Government Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade submission on the Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Cooperation in the Field of Defence and the Status of Visiting Forces

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The Northern Territory Government supports the 'Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Cooperation in the Field of Defence and the Status of Visiting Forces'. The Northern Territory acknowledges that the Agreement sets out the protections afforded to military personnel while they are in each other's territory, making it easier to conduct joint exercises and training, particularly in the Timor Sea (which borders the Northern Territory's coastal waters). The Northern Territory Government also welcomes that this Agreement will also allow greater cooperation on humanitarian assistance missions.

The Northern Territory additionally supports the Australian Government's Pacific Step-up policy. The rapidly changing strategic circumstances in the Indo-Pacific region mean that it is more important now than ever that Australia continues a strong program of engagement and advocacy throughout the region to ensure that we retain our level of access and influence.

The Northern Territory is well-placed to support the three key objectives underpinning Australia's defence strategy, in particular a sovereign nation, a secure South East Asia and South Asia, and a stable, rules-based Indo-Pacific region. The Northern Territory's northern borders are strategically located with strong ties to our northern neighbours, in particular Timor-Leste, including a growing industrial capability to support the operations of defence, national security, Australia's allies and Northern neighbours.

The Northern Territory's large, sparsely populated expanses of land, free airspace and open waters are ideal for international military training exercises and other regional surveillance training. Darwin has always been a key deployment point for defence, humanitarian assistance, border surveillance and civil maritime law enforcement, including illegal fishing, terrorism and piracy.

The Northern Territory has strong bilateral relations with Timor-Leste

As near neighbours, the Northern Territory and Timor-Leste maintain a unique and close relationship based on economic, political and community ties. Links between Darwin and Dili go back many decades, prior to the independence of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

In February 2023, the Northern Territory further strengthened our ties with Timor-Leste with the signing of a 4-year Strategic Partnership Agreement, boosting business and trade opportunities between our jurisdictions. Timor-Leste is identified as a priority country in the Northern Territory International Engagement Strategy 2022-26.

The Strategic Partnership Agreement 2023-2027 builds on a previous agreement and reinforces the strong relationship between Timor-Leste and the Northern Territory. This Agreement implements a new strategic framework for bilateral cooperation between the Timor-Leste Government and the Northern Territory Government, and will also complement the Australian Government's aid program.

Under the Strategic Partnership Agreement, Plans of Action will identify initiatives to support education, business and workforce, trade and investment, tourism, emergency preparedness, agriculture, health, sports, arts and culture. These initiatives reflect our region's shared commitment to cooperation and exchange and will add to our growing bilateral relationship. There are opportunities for the Australian Government to leverage the Northern Territory's Strategic Partnership Agreement with Timor-Leste to jointly support a range of cooperative activities.

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Humanitarian relief and disaster assistance

The Northern Territory Government supports the greater staging and deployment from the Northern Territory for humanitarian relief and disaster assistance, and for an increase in joint training for surveillance and maritime law enforcement activities to be based in the Northern Territory.

The National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre (NCCTRC) located in Darwin is a key element of the Australian Government's disaster and emergency medical response for health emergencies across Australia and throughout South East Asia and the Pacific. It also provides health and disaster management training and education programs for the region, and has partnerships with Timor-Leste.

The NCCTRC maintains Australian Government medical response capability in Darwin. It focuses on preparedness of the acute health system, specifically pre-hospital and emergency services, emergency department and acute care hospitals via the delivery of a suite of specialist short courses essential in building a local capacity to provide an immediate, integrated and coordinated acute care system-wide emergency response.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that there is a need for greater sub-national collaboration between the NCCTRC and Pacific health providers prior to health disasters; building relationships in time of stability allows for better relations and quicker responses in times of emergency. Consistent with the Australian Government's agenda to develop Northern Australia, there is an opportunity to further use Northern Australia for the staging and deployment of humanitarian relief and disaster assistance.

Maritime Capacity Building Opportunities

The Northern Territory Government supports soft and smart diplomatic efforts to help build regional confidence, e.g. a proposal to establish an Indo-Pacific Maritime Law Enforcement Centre in Darwin. A modest investment by the Australian Government could develop a regional confidence building measure in Darwin, the Indo-Pacific Maritime Law Enforcement Centre.

The Northern Territory is already a modest training provider; however, many of the existing facilities require upgrading and all would need to be integrated into a state-of-the-art training ecosystem capitalising on the Northern Territory's unique geography, existing infrastructure and skills base.

The Northern Territory Government has already undertaken some initial business planning and concept design for the Centre and considers it would provide a unique soft diplomacy tool for Australia in the Indo-Pacific region at a time when the region needs increased information sharing and transparency.

The Northern Territory is building the largest ship lift in Northern Australia to position Darwin as a major international and national player in the marine services industry. The 103 metre, 5500 tonne ship lift will be capable of servicing large vessels from industries including offshore petroleum, fishing, pearling, Defence and Border Force. There is significant potential for some boats from the new Pacific Patrol Boat fleet (Guardian Class) to undertake some level of maintenance in the Northern Territory. Enhancements to the maritime infrastructure at the Northern Territory's Marine Industry Park and the abovementioned ship lift will attract larger marine industry service and support operators into the Northern Territory. This will increase demand and enable new sustainment services to become available from Darwin. There are emerging opportunities for the Northern Territory to work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrade and Defence to develop programs that will facilitate partnerships and the sharing of capabilities of businesses in the South Pacific to improve overall economic and people-to-people links.

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The Pacific Patrol Boat Replacement Program comprises 21 x 39.5 metre steel hull vessels designed and constructed by Austal for delivery to 12 Pacific Island nations and Timor-Leste from late 2018 to 2023. While deeper level maintenance has been announced as occurring in Cairns, with the announcement of Defence's new Regional Maintenance Centre concept, there is potential for Guardian Class vessels operating in the waters to the north of the Northern Territory to undertake some level of maintenance, including unscheduled emergency repairs.

Further information on the Northern Territory's Maritime Capacity Building Opportunities can be found in the Northern Territory Government submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island Nations, available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificIslandnations/Submissions