

Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet

Opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests through existing regional architecture



Northern Territory Government Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's Inquiry into opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests through existing regional architecture

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April 2021

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The Northern Territory welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's Inquiry into opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests through existing regional architecture. The Northern Territory (NT) Government supports all efforts to deepen Australia's defence engagement and strategic cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.

The NT Government is supportive of the Commonwealth Government's position to ensure the Indo-Pacific region is stable and adheres to the multipolar order based on the rule of law and free movement, and fair and efficient multilateralism.

With the Commonwealth currently overhauling its northern development agenda, the NT Government would like to see the Commonwealth's 20-year plan for the northern development agenda evolve to address trade tensions and security challenges that were not envisaged when it was originally developed five years ago.

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Northern Territory Government's Key Issues

The NT Government:

1. Recommends the Commonwealth Government leverage the Northern Territory's strategic partnerships to jointly support regional cooperation.
2. Supports the Commonwealth Government's approach to rules-based international order and initiatives to ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Pacific Step-Up Program.
3. Welcomes the United States re-pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, including the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.
4. Encourages the Commonwealth Government to engage deeply with Asia-Pacific neighbours, particularly Indonesia. The NT welcomed the Indonesia-Australian Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which came into force on 5 July 2020.
5. Supports diplomatic efforts to build regional confidence; for example, a proposal to establish the Indo-Pacific Maritime Law Enforcement Centre in Darwin.

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Introduction

The strategic importance of Australia's north to the nation's defence has long been recognised by government and policy makers. Since World War II, northern Australia has been a critical aspect of Australia's defence and a key stakeholder in the region's security architecture.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has a significant presence in the NT comprising operational bases, training facilities, intelligence, and surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities (see below current map of major defence sites in the NT). Investments into future warfighting capabilities include 72 F-35A Lightning II aircraft, MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial systems, manned P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft.

The Morrison Government has recently announced a \$1.6 billion investment to improve Australia's air combat capability infrastructure from the NT, including approval of \$1.1 billion upgrades to Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Tindal. This will deliver enhanced air-to-air refuelling and air support capabilities to support ADF operations. The upgrades will be integral to the US Alliance and will increase the reach of Air Force capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

Darwin's role in the US Pacific pivot continues to grow following the ninth Marine Rotational Force Darwin deployment, scaled back in 2020 to mitigate risks due to COVID-19. However, around 1200 US Marines were able to train through the dry season with the ADF at defence facilities across the NT, including at Mt Bunday and Kangaroo Flats training areas.

The NT hosts and supports several large scale military exercises which foster and strengthen security and humanitarian partnerships across the Indo-Pacific region. Exercise Kakadu, held biennially in Darwin, is Australia's largest maritime exercise. It is an Australian-led multilateral exercise involving 27 participating nations' Defence Forces. Participating nations include Bangladesh, Canada, Chile, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, the People's Republic of China, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, the UAE, the US and Vietnam.

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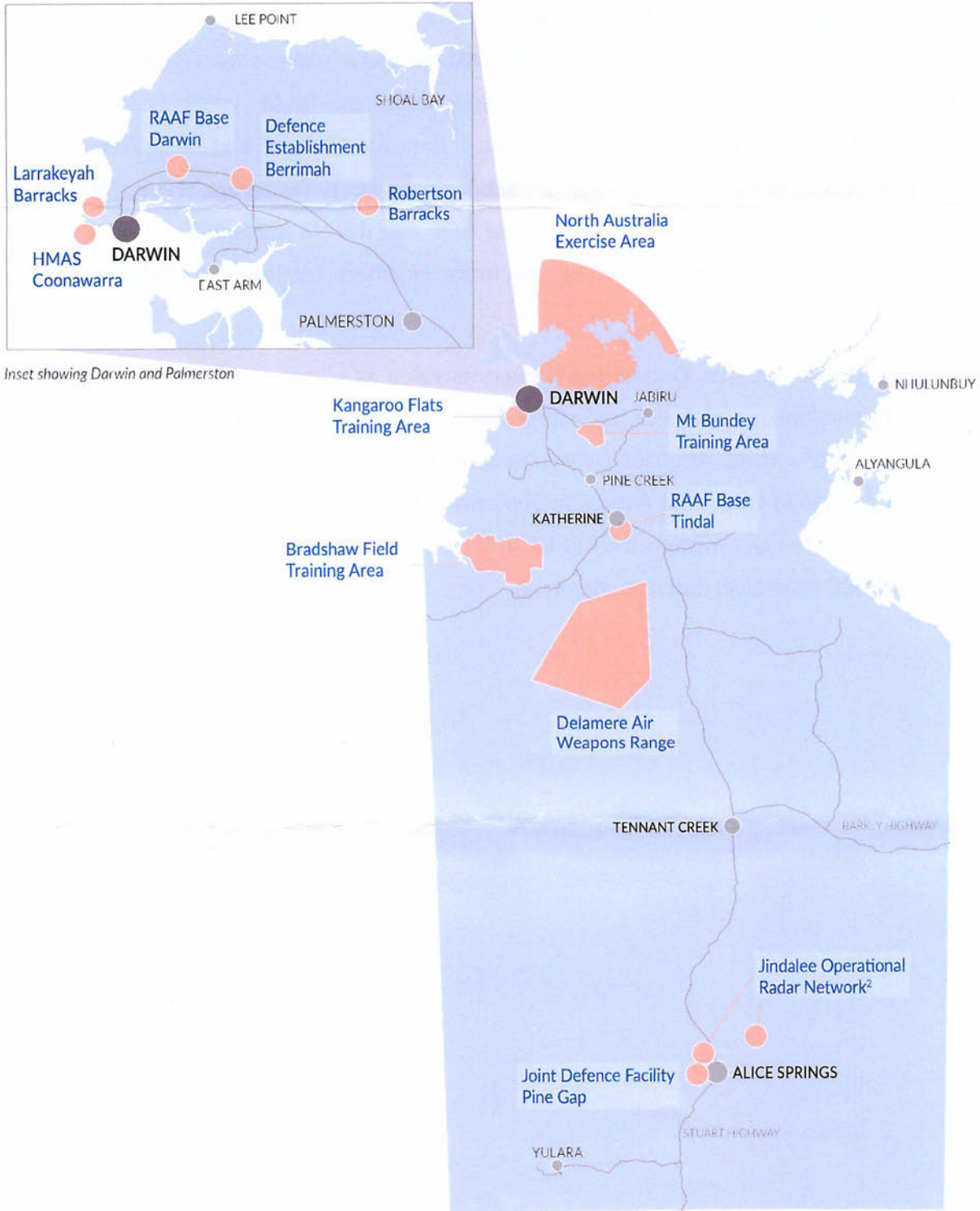
Exercise Pitch Black is the RAAF's biennial multi-national warfare exercise conducted from RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal. The 2022 exercise will see the return of regional neighbours flying Large Force Employment missions with the RAAF, which will debut the F-35A Joint Strike Fighter. Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and New Zealand are regular participants in the exercise. Talisman Sabre occurs every two years, and is the largest bilateral combined training activity between the ADF and the US military. Talisman Sabre is carried out at the Mount Bunday training area in the Northern Territory and Shoalwater Bay training area in Queensland.

Over the past two decades, Darwin has proven its value as a base to respond to key tasks including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and peacekeeping. In 2006, Darwin was transformed into a major forward operating base to serve the peacekeeping mission to East Timor, known as Operation Astute. In September 1999, Darwin also played a crucial role in the Australian led UN mission INTERFET in East Timor which involved 20 countries and more than 5000 Australian defence personnel.

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Map of Major Defence Sites in the Northern Territory



Inset showing Darwin and Palmerston

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Engagement with the United States and partners

The NT is vital to Australia's continued support to the implementation of United States (US) Force Posture Initiatives, which both support enhanced US engagement in our region and provide the ADF with improved training opportunities and closer interoperability with US forces. Building on its long history as a traditional forward operating base for the ADF and allies and partners, as well as border security agencies, the north is well positioned to maintain this role as we move into the next generation of warfare.

The US and other regional partners are moving towards smaller, agile platforms based throughout the Asia-Pacific. In addition to new capabilities, there will also be the requirement for increased supporting infrastructure, including in northern Australia. For example, the recent announcement to build a US-funded strategic fuel reserve in the NT. These projects deliver on national security requirements for Australia, our allies and partners.

With developments in US strategic thinking, the importance of the north could well increase significantly in the coming years. With the development Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative and other policy shifts back to Asia, we will see more US troops training and exercising, increased prepositioning of equipment, missile defence capabilities and new ISR assets in the region.

The NT has some unique characteristics that will help support the basing, forward operating, training, data support and maintenance and sustainment for the ADF, US and other partner nations in this new strategic environment. These include, but are not limited to, established electronic and traditional warfare training ranges, very low to nil electromagnetic interference, established US training presence, proximity to Asia and the equator, abundant natural resources and large, sparsely populated land mass.

We believe the Commonwealth Government could be investing more into northern Australia to contribute to Australia's national resilience and to support a stable and resilient Indo-Pacific. The NT Government envisions the Territory as the Indo-Pacific leader for world-class, networked training ranges. This may be through the upgrading of existing training ranges or the establishment of bespoke ranges for specific capabilities, such as drones and autonomous vehicles. These enhanced ranges would satisfy US and other partner's requirements and provide the ability to test 5th generation platforms and systems over specialised ranges located far from population centres.

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There are ever emerging opportunities to undertake Defence and humanitarian assistance engagements with European Allies in the Indo-Pacific, who have traditionally not played an active role in Indo-Pacific engagements.

The United Kingdom (UK) has recently launched their 'Integrated Review 2021' paper which provides an articulation of the UK's national security and international policy which tilts the United Kingdom's post-Brexit foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, Germany has recently launched their 'Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region'. Both of these documents set an ambitious plan for increased engagement across the economy, security, the climate, the stability of the rules-based international order, digital connectivity, and people to-people links. In both papers Australia is noted as a key strategic partner for engagement in the region.

Similarly, France shares an interest in further developing our presence in the Indo-Pacific region and ensuring the region is stable and adheres to the multipolar order based on the rule of law and free movement, and fair and efficient multilateralism. For France, the Indo-Pacific space is a geographic reality. France is present in the region via its overseas territories and 93% of its exclusive economic zones are located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The region is home to 1.5 million French nationals, as well as 8000 soldiers stationed in the region.

The NT would welcome the opportunity to have these nations to undertake training in the NT, as well as use the Territory as a strategic base to stage and undertake deployment of humanitarian relief and disaster assistance in the Indo-Pacific.

Maritime security

The NT Government seeking to establish an Indo-Pacific Maritime Law Enforcement Centre in Darwin. This will be a one-stop shop for regional partners to advance maritime law enforcement capabilities through professional development and encourage regional cooperation and partnerships. This will complement other initiatives the Commonwealth Government is progressing under the Pacific Step-Up such as the *Pacific Fusion Centre*.

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The NT Government has already undertaken some initial business planning and concept design for the Centre and believe 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. It would engage potentially up to 22 nations, including importantly the US, Japan, Singapore, India, China and Indonesia.

Over the last decade, civil maritime (coast guard) security concerns have featured prominently in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states' individual and collective agendas. During the past five years, ASEAN nations have increased their coast guard and maritime border capabilities in response to the progressively more complex maritime security environment. However, there are serious ongoing concerns about most ASEAN states' capacities to deploy and maintain these capabilities, and to use intelligence and surveillance effectively in coordinating their operations.

The Indo-Pacific Maritime Law Enforcement Centre is an exemplar of the soft diplomatic initiatives the Australian Government is seeking to promote in the Indo-Pacific.

Ship Lift Facility and Marine Industry Park

The NT Government is also leading on other initiatives to support Australia's bilateral and multilateral defence and security requirements in the region. The NT Government has committed to building the largest ship lift facility in northern Australia. The 103 metre, 5000 tonne, ship lift will be capable of servicing Royal Australian Navy and Australian Border Force vessels as well as large vessels from industries including offshore petroleum, fishing and pearling. 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 NT Marine Industry Park and the 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 NT 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 Indo-Pacific and enhance regional cooperation.

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The Pacific Patrol Boat Replacement Program (PPBR) 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 NT to undertake some level of maintenance, including unscheduled emergency repairs.

Further information on the NT's Maritime Capacity Building Opportunities can be found in the NT 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

Digital domain

The NT is set to take a leading role in international telecommunications across South East Asia. As Australia's most northern capital city, Darwin is uniquely placed to become an international hub between Australia's east coast and major commercial and population centres in neighbouring South East Asia. Darwin will transform to a digital leader in the region through the development of a highly secure, high speed terabit network. Using existing infrastructure with some additional installations, the terabit network will support the needs of government and Defence.

There is also a planned fibre link which will span the Indo-Pacific regions, providing the first subsea route to directly connect Darwin, Singapore, Indonesia and the US. These networks will provide a platform for the NT to develop a digital technologies hub in the NT, including data centres and dedicated Defence and national security digital test labs. Further information on Terabit Territory is available at: <https://cmc.nt.gov.au/advancing-industry/terabit-territory>

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Critical minerals

Critical minerals, including rare earths, are of strategic value because of their crucial role as components in a wide range of weapons and enabling systems for the world's military. The NT has the potential to be a major supplier of critical minerals, including lithium, vanadium and rare earths. Securing supplies of rare earths has become a key strategic issue for Australia and its allies. The NT Government continues to work closely with the Commonwealth Government's Critical Minerals Facilitation Office to promote Territory critical minerals projects such as Arafura Resources' Nolans rare earths project, TNG's Mount Peake vanadium project and Core Lithium's Finniss project. Further information on NT critical minerals projects can be found at: <https://resourcingtheterritory.nt.gov.au/minerals/mineral-commodities/critical-minerals>

Humanitarian Assistance

The NT has long-standing trade, socio-cultural, education, people-to-people, business-to-business, interpersonal and intergovernmental ties with our Indo-Pacific neighbours. While most engagements are focussed on countries immediately to our north, our humanitarian and disaster assistance activities and related capacity building education programs, and employment schemes already extend to South Pacific nations.

During the 2002 Bali bombing terrorist attack, Darwin with its world class medical facilities became the principle reception centre receiving more than 60 of the most seriously injured victims. The Commonwealth Government's National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre (NCCTRC) based in Darwin works alongside the NT Department of Health and has a rapidly deployable workforce to respond to sudden health emergencies both onshore and in the region.

The NCCTRC 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 immediate, integrated and coordination acute – care system wide emergency response. The NCCTRC continues to explore opportunities for training partnerships including visits and exchanges of health staff in Australia's near region.

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The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that there is a need for greater sub-national collaboration between the NCCTRC and Indo-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 Commonwealth 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.