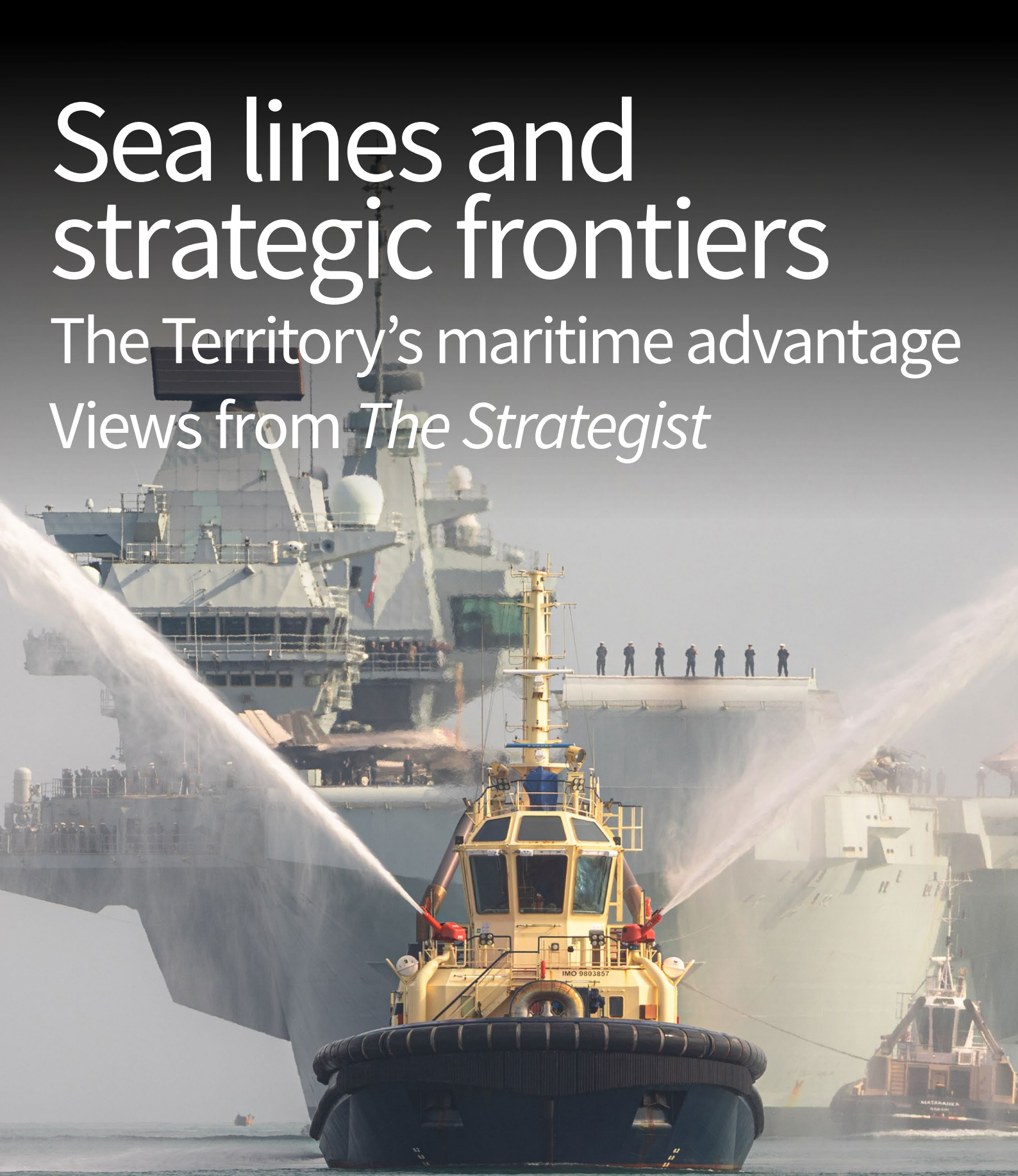
Sea lines and strategic frontiers

The Territory's maritime advantage

Views from *The Strategist*



EDITED BY
RAELENE LOCKHORST
AND JOHN COYNE

ASPI
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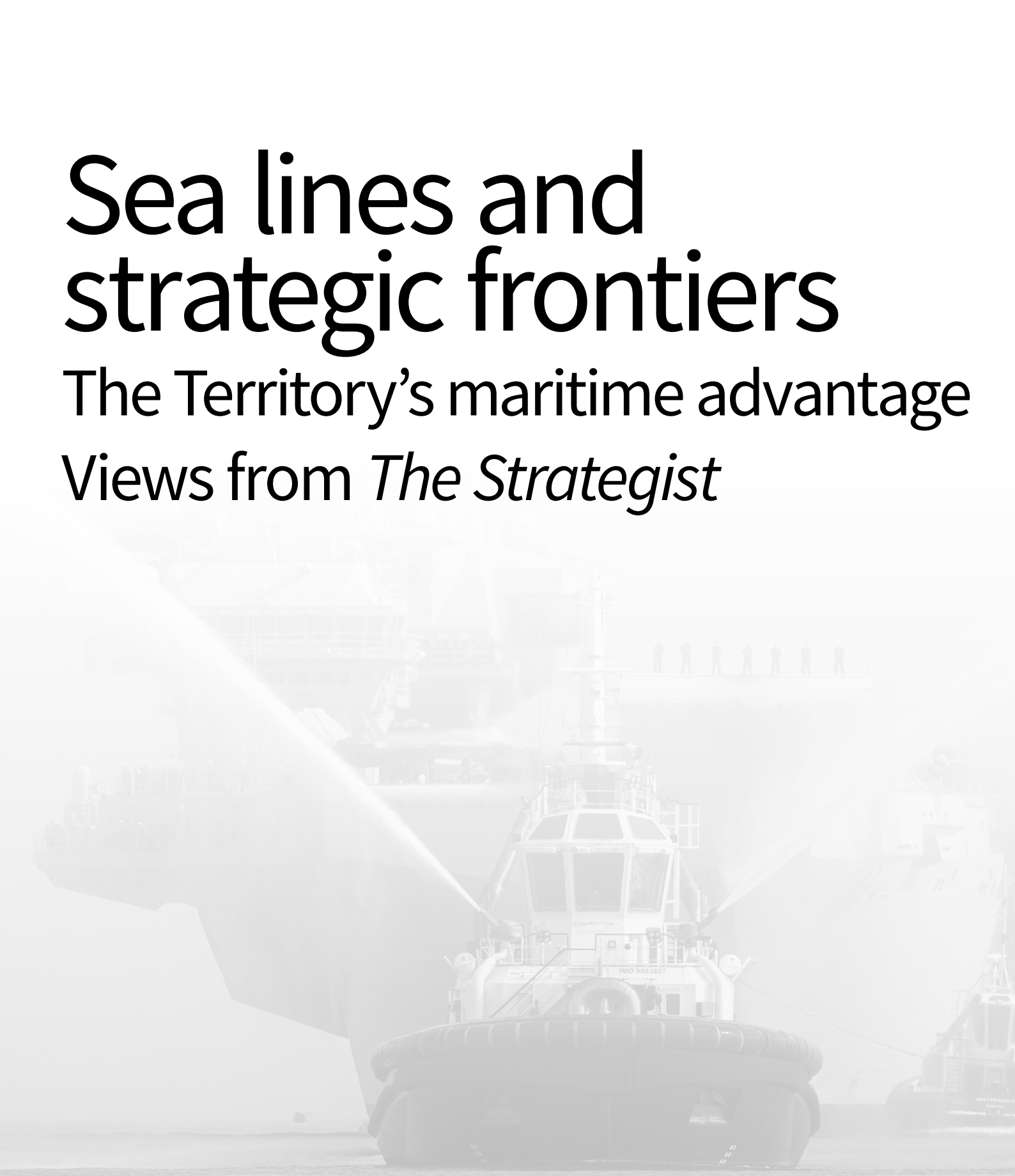

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ASPI
Level 2
40 Macquarie Street
Barton ACT 2600
Australia

Tel Canberra + 61 2 6270 5100
Email enquiries@aspi.org.au
www.aspi.org.au
www.aspistrategist.org.au

Facebook.com/ASPI.org

@ASPI_org

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Foreword

By Hon Lia Finocchiaro MLA, Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government

It is an honour to introduce this maritime edition of *North of 26° South and the Security of Australia: Views from The Strategist*.

For generations, the Northern Territory has stood as Australia's first line of defence and gateway to the Indo-Pacific. From the bombing of Darwin during the World War II to today's AUKUS era, Territorians have consistently met the call to serve, protect and build. We understand the weight of responsibility that comes with defending our nation's freedom and way of life.

The 2024 National Defence Strategy makes clear that northern Australia is the fulcrum of our national posture. It is where geography, capability and alliance meet. For the Territory, this is not theory but lived reality.

Darwin, Katherine and Gove are essential nodes in a modern, networked Defence architecture supporting operations that span from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. This is where Australia extends its reach into the region, where our partners deploy and train, and where our shared resolve for regional stability takes practical form.

Thousands of Australian and allied personnel operate here each year through the Marine Rotational Force–Darwin and major exercises such as Talisman Sabre, Kakadu and Pitch Black. Our ports, bases and facilities are not just infrastructure; they are instruments of shared purpose and capability.

Darwin's Port, the Larrakeyah Defence Precinct and HMAS Coonawarra form the heart of northern operations. The visit of the USS *Minnesota*, the first nuclear-powered submarine to conduct maintenance in Darwin, marked a milestone in our AUKUS cooperation. The presence of Japan's JS *Yahagi* and the Royal Navy's HMS *Prince of Wales* reinforced that our northern waters are now central to regional security.

Strategic geography alone is not enough. It must be matched with enabling infrastructure and strong communities. The Northern Territory government is investing in projects that underpin national resilience and strengthen both national capability and our local economy.

Defence is not a visitor here. It is part of our community. Defence activity already accounts for around eight percent of the Territory's economy and continues to grow alongside local enterprise. The men and women of the Australian Defence Force who serve in the Northern Territory are our neighbours, mentors and contributors to community life.

The Territory's industrial base—spanning ship repair, logistics, aviation, construction and digital infrastructure—continues to expand in step with Defence investment. Our small and medium enterprises are proven, resilient and innovative. They understand northern conditions because they live them.

Darwin's recent hosting of trilateral and bilateral meetings, such as Australia–Japan–US defence consultations and AUKMIN 2025, shows that the centre of gravity for Indo-Pacific security is moving north. The Territory stands ready to deliver the infrastructure, partnerships and workforce required to meet the nation's needs.

Our forebears in the 1940s understood that the defence of Australia begins here. That same spirit drives us today: to strengthen deterrence through presence, to build capability through collaboration and to ensure alliances take root on Territory soil.

This is the North's time once again.

The Northern Territory is not Australia's frontier; it is our strategic heart.

We stand ready, shoulder to shoulder, to defend, deter and deliver for the nation and our allies.

Introduction

By Dr John Coyne and Raelene Lockhorst

The North as Australia's strategic fulcrum

Darwin has become the physical expression of Australia's Indo-Pacific ambition. In this city, geography, logistics and alliances converge to deliver deterrence and resilience. From its deep-water harbour and strike-capable runways to its proximity to the world's most contested sea lanes, the Northern Territory is the point from which Australia engages the region and secures its future. Closer to Manila than Melbourne, the Top End turns distance into an advantage.

In the decades ahead, the credibility of Australia's deterrence and the strength of its alliances will be measured not in statements but in the tempo of operations sustained from the North. The Territory's infrastructure, workforce, and social fabric now underpin the capacity to project power, support partners, and recover from crisis. Its geography grants reach, but its people and governance confer resilience.

That this reality has taken so long to emerge speaks to a recurring weakness in national strategy. For decades, the North was treated as an episodic concern, a buffer rather than a base of operations. The challenge now is to ensure that Darwin's strategic renaissance becomes structural: that investment, governance, and national planning entrench the North as Australia's enduring foundation for Indo-Pacific security.

From frontier to foundation – Rethinking the North

When ASPI established the Northern Australia Strategic Policy Centre in 2016, the North's strategic potential remained largely dormant in the national imagination. It had long been a place of declaration, not development.

The 1986 Dibb Review and the 1987 Defence White Paper formalised the *Defence of Australia* doctrine, positioning the North as a conceptual air-sea gap, a buffer through which an adversary would pass. While the doctrine sharpened strategic geography, it entrenched a defensive mindset. The North was examined on maps, but neglected in budgets.

The 1990s began to shift that outlook. The relocation of 1st Brigade to Robertson Barracks and upgrades to RAAF Bases Darwin and Tindal embedded a sustained Defence presence. Australia moved, from defending Australia from the North, to defending Australia *in* the North.

But by 2001, momentum had waned. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 reoriented strategic attention toward distant theatres. Darwin served as a critical staging point for operations in Timor-Leste, but national investment and focus shifted to sustaining coalition campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Tanks, armour and other assets once central to the northern posture were re-tasked or withdrawn.

The global war on terror revealed a deeper flaw: Australia's habit of treating its northern posture as cyclical rather than foundational. Infrastructure conceived for deterrence lay under-utilised. A strategically vital geography hosted a hollowing force structure.

By the late 2000s, Defence thinking began to rediscover geography. The concept of forward presence, later refined in ASPI's Forward Operating Base North paper, recognised that deterrence required proximity and persistence. Logistics concentrated in the south left the nation's operational frontier exposed. Geography had to be matched by investment and intent.

From 2016 onwards, ASPI's work reframed the North not as a cost centre, but as a value multiplier—the connective tissue between Australia's domestic prosperity and its regional security. A socially and economically strong north, it argued, was the precondition for a secure Australia.

Nearly a decade later, that proposition has become orthodoxy. Defence expenditure now accounts for roughly eight percent of the Territory's GDP. In Darwin, Defence is not an occasional visitor but part of the community's identity. The Northern Territory government, industry and local communities have turned partnership into a practical reality.

Still, the project is unfinished. Building in the North comes at a higher cost, the distances are vast and the climate is harsh, but those costs purchase something irreplaceable: proximity, resilience and sovereign control. Each new

wharf, runway and sealed road shortens internal lines of communication and strengthens deterrence by distance. The enduring dividend is clear: proximity as power.

The Indo-Pacific contest – Geography meets competition

The Indo-Pacific is a region where geography and power are once again inseparable. Its seas are crowded, contested and decisive. Strategic competition has become structural, enduring and most visible at sea.

China's behaviour has fundamentally reshaped the operating environment. Its coercive statecraft—encompassing economic, diplomatic and maritime aspects—is a systemic approach. Artificial-island militarisation, grey-zone tactics and the weaponisation of trade have eroded long-standing assumptions about peace and sovereignty. Beijing's objective isn't merely to influence, but to control: to determine the pace and conditions of regional activity, making freedom of navigation contingent upon its consent. The result is a region no longer open by default.

This contest of endurance is giving rise to a new architecture of deterrence. Australia's partnerships with the United States, Japan and India have deepened around a shared principle that credible capability and sustained presence are the foundations of stability. Within this network, Darwin is where ambition should become action.

Darwin's geography confers reach, depth and tempo. Its deep-water port and adjacent airfields enable allied and Australian forces to project power across the archipelagic approaches, sustain operations into the eastern Indian Ocean, and support freedom of navigation through the South China Sea. Logistics chains converge here: task groups can refuel, repair and reconstitute closer to the theatre, reducing strategic latency. Deterrence depends on both intent and readiness, and Darwin provides both.

Exercises such as Talisman Sabre, Pitch Black and Kakadu transform the North into a living demonstration of coalition integration. They stress-test logistics, interoperability and command cohesion. Each deployment of allied aircraft and ships through Darwin sends a practical and political signal: that Australia and its partners are present, prepared and united.

For Southeast Asian nations navigating coercion, Darwin offers a model of practical cooperation. It anchors regional training, humanitarian response, maritime policing and energy connectivity, becoming a trusted hub where credibility is the currency.

The Indo-Pacific contest will not be decided by declarations in capitals, but rather by which nations can move, sustain and endure. Darwin turns geography into leverage, a sovereign platform for collective power. In an era defined by strategic competition, the North is where deterrence takes shape and where Australia's alliances meet the sea.

Geography as advantage – Turning location into power

Today, Darwin occupies one of the most strategically valuable positions in the democratic world. From this vantage point, Australia can project power, sustain its presence and influence outcomes across the Timor, Arafura and Banda seas, as well as the wider archipelagic approaches. It is not an outpost at the edge of Asia; it is the hinge that connects allied access, mobility and maritime coordination in the Indo-Pacific century.

Geography grants reach only when it is fused with capability. From Darwin, maritime patrol aircraft and long-range surveillance systems monitor vital sea lanes linking the Strait of Malacca to the South China Sea. Naval and amphibious units can deploy forward, sustained by deep-water access and rapid airlift from RAAF Tindal and Katherine. The ability to refuel, repair and rearm close to the theatre converts geography into readiness.

In a region defined by grey-zone coercion and accelerating maritime competition, Darwin provides operational depth and flexibility. It enables Australia and its partners to maintain a persistent presence without overextension. Deterrence here is not merely rhetorical; it is evident in the infrastructure, tempo and endurance of activity.

Yet geography alone is inert. Strategic advantage emerges only when policy, industry and infrastructure transform location into capacity. Northern Australia's strength depends on an integrated network of ports, ship lifts, maintenance hubs and energy systems that underpin sustained maritime operations. As ASPI's 2016 *Forward Operating Base North* report argued, the North offers

reach and resilience, but only disciplined governance and long-term investment can convert that potential into deterrence. In this century, geography is not destiny; it is design.

Lessons from history – Logistics, lines and leverage

History shows that engineers and logisticians play a significant role in winning wars, just as much as strategists. During the Korean War, the United Nations Command faced the tyranny of distance: supplies had to be transported thousands of kilometres from Japan and the US through limited ports, creating delays and increased exposure. Victory followed only once internal lines of communication were shortened and sustainment was made local. The lesson was simple: the side that shortened its lines would gain initiative and keep it.

The US absorbed this truth, embedding forward logistics into the Cold War posture from Guam to Diego Garcia. Credible deterrence began with logistics discipline—the capacity to move, store and sustain forces forward without reliance on distant hubs.

Australia faces the same structural challenge today. Its industrial heart lies in the south; its strategic frontier in the North. Every kilometre between them adds cost, risk and delay. In a contested region where time and access determine success, forward sustainment is not optional; it's a precondition of deterrence.

Logistics has become a strategic approach. No longer just a support function, it is the invisible architecture that transforms presence into power. ASPI's 2021 *Resilient Supply Chains* and 2023 *Shortening the Lines* reports advocated for integrating infrastructure, logistics and governance into a unified model of national preparedness, merging civilian and military capabilities under a common purpose. The North is where this model must be tested: its ports, roads, airfields and communities form the proving ground for turning distance into deterrence and geography into resilience.

A living alliance network

Darwin has become the operational core of Australia's Indo-Pacific defence posture, the place where alliances are exercised, not declared. From the deep-water port to the runways of RAAF Tindal, the North enables allied forces to train, sustain and project power across contested maritime approaches. The US Force Posture Initiatives have embedded rotational Marine, air and logistics elements across the Top End, creating a constant rhythm of readiness. Each dry season, more than 2,500 US Marines arrive under the Marine Rotational Force–Darwin (MRF-D), integrating seamlessly with Australian, Japanese and regional partners. This posture has transformed Darwin from a staging post into a true forward hub. Exercises such as Pitch Black, Kakadu, Koolendong and Talisman Sabre stress-test logistics, interoperability and command cohesion under realistic conditions. These are not displays of goodwill; they are live experiments in collective deterrence, where strategy meets geography.

Recent milestones have reinforced that reality. In March and April, the USS *Minnesota* and USS *Emory S Land* conducted maintenance in Darwin; in August, Japan's JS Yahagi docked at HMAS Coonawarra; and in July, Canada's HMCS *Ville de Québec* executed the first allied missile reload in Australian waters. Each event signalled confidence in northern infrastructure and governance.

Darwin now anchors a lattice of democratic power stretching from the eastern Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. In a region defined by coercion and ambiguity, Darwin is where allied intent should become operational effect.

Building the sustainment ecosystem

Defence's Plan Galileo has established the Darwin Regional Maintenance Centre (RMC-North) as the final link in a national sustainment network spanning Cairns, Henderson and Sydney. Together with the Darwin Ship Lift and the Middle Arm Precinct, it could form a complete forward-maintenance ecosystem, a modern analogue to the bases that sustained allied operations during the Korean War, now under Australian control.

This ecosystem is both social and strategic in nature. It anchors communities, builds skilled workforces and attracts industry. Yet sustaining it requires disciplined coordination. Without coherent planning between federal and Territory governments, Australia risks building faster than it can staff or maintain.

Private capital remains constrained by insurance costs, limited scale and thin markets. Translating Defence investment into durable commercial ecosystems will demand new public–private risk-sharing models, sovereign guarantees, infrastructure underwriting and incentives that align national-security imperatives with commercial viability. When successful, this partnership converts Defence expenditure into lasting regional prosperity—an actual dual-use dividend.

Shared deterrence and forward presence

ASPI has long argued that the US and its allies should pre-position equipment and materiel in northern Australia rather than rely on distant depots. Geography, political reliability and climate stability all support that logic. Pre-positioned assets—including armoured vehicles, fuel, munitions and aviation spares—stored at RAAF Tindal, Larrakeyah Barracks and depots near Katherine would reduce transit times by thousands of kilometres, allowing for rapid mobilisation in a crisis.

This is already underway. Under the Enhanced Force Posture Agreement (EFPA), Washington has committed more than A$2 billion to upgrades across Darwin and Katherine, expanded fuel storage, hardened runways and maintenance facilities. Forward sustainment is moving from concept to reality.

Importantly, this expansion isn't about confrontation. Transparent and cooperative forward presence is inherently stabilising. It ensures that Australia and its partners can maintain a free, open and resilient Indo-Pacific through credible capabilities and constant readiness.

The Northern partnership – People, government and purpose

The Northern Territory carries a national mission. Defence contributes nearly ten percent of the Territory's GDP, embedding itself in daily life. It's not an adjunct to the economy but an anchor of identity.

The Territory government has demonstrated pragmatic leadership through projects such as the Middle Arm Industrial Precinct, the Darwin Ship Lift, and new logistics corridors linking ports, airfields and industrial estates.

These initiatives demonstrate what coordinated regional strategy can achieve, but also expose a familiar risk: ambition outpacing national coordination. Programs such as the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (NAIF) show that vision achieves little without execution and discipline. Success in the North depends on a partnership that strikes a balance between regional initiative and national design.

Northern resilience, shaped by isolation and scale, provides a template for national capability development. But determination alone isn't power. Lasting success requires sustained collaboration among the federal government, the Territory, and the private sector.

Yes, building in the North costs more—labour, logistics and materials carry a premium—but those costs purchase proximity, redundancy and deterrence. Each kilometre of sealed road, each new wharf and trained tradesperson reduces strategic risk. The price of doing business in the North is the cost of sovereignty.

No discussion of the North's transformation is complete without recognising the central role of Indigenous landholders and Traditional Owners. Much of Defence's training estate and industrial corridor lies on Indigenous-owned land. Partnerships built on consent, respect and shared stewardship are therefore not optional but foundational to legitimacy and continuity.

Defence's emerging Indigenous Engagement Strategy rightly emphasises local employment, cultural heritage protection and benefit-sharing. Projects from the Bradshaw Field Training Area to energy ventures in Arnhem Land demonstrate that enduring capability relies on both cultural and physical infrastructure. A secure Australia must be built *with* its First Nations peoples, not merely *upon* their land.

The North as Australia's centre of gravity

Darwin's transformation is reshaping Australia's internal balance of power. The North is no longer peripheral; it is the centre of gravity. Its infrastructure forms the skeleton of deterrence, and its communities are the lifeblood of resilience.

Defence investment alone cannot guarantee success. Strategic stability will come from sustained partnerships

among federal, Territory and industry entities, to ensure that economic diversification and Defence sustainment advance together. Energy, resources, food, logistics and population all contribute to one outcome: a sovereign, prosperous, and resilient North that multiplies national power.

In the Indo-Pacific century, infrastructure is a source of power. The capacity to move, maintain and sustain forces at speed defines deterrence. The Darwin Ship Lift, Middle Arm Industrial Precinct and Marine Industry Park will provide sovereign sustainment capability previously unavailable in the North. Although primarily economic projects, they serve dual strategic purposes, including supporting efficiency, redundancy and resilience. The co-location of Defence and commercial infrastructure demands continuous coordination and transparent governance, but it fosters economic growth and national security.

Climate adaptation now sits at the heart of disaster risk reduction and management. The North faces intensifying heat, cyclones, flooding and coastal erosion. Hardened shelters, elevated fuel depots, resilient power grids and diversified energy sources are as vital as any weapons system. Integrating renewable micro-grids, hydrogen production and battery storage into Defence precincts will enhance both military endurance and civilian recovery. Building for the climate we face, not the one we inherited, is essential for credible deterrence.

Northern Australia's resources are strategic. Gas, renewables and minerals underpin both economic development and sovereignty. The Crowley East Arm Fuel Terminal, Vopak reserves and future pipelines will provide redundancy for both Defence and commerce. Emerging gas and hydrogen-ammonia projects in the Beetaloo Basin will secure energy resilience while supporting the national transition to renewables. Distributed micro-grids and hybrid storage can power remote communities and industrial zones, strengthening deterrence and development simultaneously.

Diversification will test coordination. Balancing export markets, Defence needs and environmental sustainability will require whole-of-government alignment—a discipline Australia has too often lacked. Likewise, the North's critical minerals and agricultural output reinforce Australia's role as a trusted supplier in a fragmenting world. Infrastructure built for Defence sustainment can also support minerals processing and food logistics. In this way, the North becomes a resilient economy, merging security and prosperity through shared assets.

Where Australia's strength begins

When ASPI first advanced the concept of *Forward Operating Base North*, it challenged orthodoxy: it suggested that geography should be treated not as a burden but as a strategic advantage; that national security begins with national development; and that the North holds the key to both. Nine years later, that vision is being realised, but it is not yet complete.

Darwin has become a living expression of allied cooperation and national resolve. Enduring success, however, rests on three commitments:

1. **Sustained investment**—a national partnership that continues to integrate infrastructure, industry and Defence across the North.
2. **Integrated planning**—a unified Defence-industry framework treating the North as a single enterprise, not a patchwork of projects.
3. **Allied embedding**—deeper cooperation through AUKUS, the Quad and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that makes Darwin the Indo-Pacific's resilience hub.

The North must have maintain dual economic-security focus: A hardened base without a living economy is brittle; a prosperous economy without security is exposed.

Darwin is now the anchor of Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy—the meeting point of geography, ambition and alliance. Its harbours, airfields and industries are the arteries of resilience; its people and government provide the pulse. If deterrence through strength defines the next era, the North is where that strength begins. Its success will shape not only Australia's security but the stability of the wider region.

Our geography gives us reach.

Our partnerships give us power.

Together, they make Northern Australia indispensable.

1

Maritime strategy and power projection

With Chinese warships nearby, Australia needs to step up as a maritime power

Jennifer Parker

Image of the Chinese coast guard ship *Nansha*: Wikipedia.

China now fields the world's largest navy, and last week's rare foray into our exclusive economic zone should be a wake-up call for Australians. Our most critical economic and security interests travel by sea, and in a rapidly deteriorating strategic environment, we can't afford complacency. It's time for Australia to step up as a genuine maritime power.

Over the last decade, China has morphed from a modest coastal navy into a true blue-water force. In 2015, its navy's battle force—submarines, surface combatants and aircraft carriers—stood at 255 vessels, according to the US Congressional Research Office. That figure has soared to 400 in 2025, with further growth on the horizon. The fleet's quality has also jumped, with around 70 per cent of China's current battle force built since 2010.

The Royal Australian Navy fields just 16 battle-force vessels—its smallest and oldest in decades. That includes six submarines aged 22 to 29 years, seven Anzac-class frigates (19 years to 27 years old), and three much newer Hobart-class destroyers that lack the firepower of true destroyers. While the government plans to grow the fleet by the 2030s and 2040s to levels not seen in decades, the current shortfall is compounded by dwindling support capabilities—such as replenishment, hydrography and

mine warfare—after decades of underinvestment by successive governments.

Comparing ship counts alone may be crude, but it highlights China's drive to become a true blue-water maritime power. Its rapid fleet expansion goes hand in hand with sweeping structural reforms, including the creation of a coast guard in 2013—now the world's largest maritime law enforcement outfit, boasting more than 142 vessels.

Among them is the so-called monster ship 5901 *Nansha*—nearly four times the size of an Anzac-class frigate, which form the backbone of our surface combatant fleet.

The growth and modernisation of China's navy has gone hand-in-hand with an increasingly expeditionary strategy. Chinese naval deployments to the Indian and Pacific oceans are on the rise, marked by the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti in 2017 and increasingly common Pacific port visits, including stops in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea as well as hospital ship deployments to the South Pacific. Against this backdrop, Australia shouldn't be shocked to see a Chinese navy task group off our east coast.

It's rightly considered an uncommon occurrence, particularly since Australia's east coast isn't exactly on the way to anywhere—making it clear this was a deliberate show of capability. But we should expect it to become increasingly common.

Why should Australia care about China's growing naval and maritime power? Because our core vulnerabilities lie at sea. Some 99 per cent of our trade travels by ship, and 99 per cent of our data travelling to the rest of the world passes through undersea cables. But it's not just about data and trade generally; it's particularly the critical goods that keep our economy running and ensure our security, from fuel and ammunition to pharmaceuticals and fertiliser. Cut off those supplies, and we cripple our economy and security: no fuel means grounded F-35s and idle trucks nationwide.

In a crisis or conflict, an adversary wouldn't need to invade our shores to bring Australia's economy—and by extension, our defence—to its knees. All it would have to do would be to cut off our critical seaborne supplies: fuel, fertiliser, ammunition, pharmaceuticals, and more. In a rapidly deteriorating strategic environment, Australia must be able to defend its maritime domain.

Recognising this vulnerability means Australia must develop the capacity to protect critical seaborne supplies in a crisis. It demands focus, structural reform, speed and investment. The 2021 announcement of AUKUS (our nuclear-powered submarine pathway), the planned surface combatant fleet expansion and the army's move to adopt maritime strike are all crucial steps, but they aren't enough. We must address the wider gaps in the fleet, and do it at speed.

We must recognise that maritime capability isn't just hardware; it's also structure and mindset. We need to reform our civil maritime security, establish a coastguard to free the Royal Australian Navy from border policing and adjust our legislative architecture to build a genuinely capable maritime strategic fleet.

Australia shouldn't, and can't, hope to match China's naval might. Our maritime strategy hinges on alliances and partnerships across the region, including deeper co-operation with partners like the United States, Japan, and India. Yet to safeguard our vital interests at sea, we must demonstrate self-reliance within our alliances – we must develop a comprehensive maritime strategy and resource it.

China's naval demonstration on Australia's east coast should serve a reminder of our vulnerability, and a warning that addressing this vulnerability requires Australia to truly recognise its place as a maritime power. Our future prosperity and security depend on it.

Published on 25 Feb 2025. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/with-chinese-warships-nearby-australia-needs-to-step-up-as-a-maritime-power/

Faster cheaper ways to expand Australia's maritime firepower

Thomas Lonergan

Image of Typhon battery: US Army.

Following the release of the Australia's Surface Fleet Review, a big problem remains: the Australian Defence Force lacks sufficient maritime firepower to credibly implement deterrence-by-denial in the next 10 years.

Building ships and submarines is complex, eye-wateringly expensive and slow. Fielding ground-based strike systems and asymmetric naval capabilities can be much faster and cheaper.

While new frigates are under construction, and before the first Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarine arrives in 2032, what else can be done? How could the ADF more robustly deny access to Australia's northern approaches?

Fortunately, there are a few maritime-firepower efforts underway in the army that we could expand and accelerate. Meanwhile, the navy can embrace unpredictable capability ideas generated within its own ranks and industry. Pursuing this would mean applying the force-design guidance from the Defence Strategic Review (DSR): mindsets must change, overcoming 'the current bias towards platforms.'

So, here are three affordable ways in which the army and navy could counterintuitively field new options in a strategically relevant timeframe.

First, the army should accelerate and expand its existing land-based anti-ship missile plans, which are based on using launcher trucks, such as the HIMARS. They are agile, easily hidden, rapidly deployable by air or sea and can be acquired far more cheaply and quickly than ships.

The plans have been under consideration for some time, although they have been more modest than US Army and Marine Corps efforts and have had lower priority than Australian acquisition of new tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Equipped with PrSM Increment 2 missiles, for example, the army will be able to strike maritime (and other targets) out to 500km. When combined with counter-space and air defence systems, and matched with new littoral watercraft accelerated for delivery by 2026, the army will be able to field credible area-denial complexes over archipelagic chokepoints in Australia's northern approaches.

But the army will need more money to do this faster and at larger scale. Responding to the DSR, the government announced a second HIMARS regiment capable of maritime strike would be grown, but it reportedly won't be ready before 2030. With new or reallocated money and more flexible recruitment, including by harnessing the reserve, the army has the can-do that's needed to quickly adapt and deliver this option by the end of 2026.

Second, since the navy can't deploy sufficient mass at sea before the mid-2030s, it should give the army some of its early deliveries of Tomahawk cruise missiles and SM-6s, which are surface-to-air missiles that can be used ballistically against ships and ground targets. The army would deploy them on land. Production capacity of the missiles is limited and there's competing demand from US and Japanese forces, but if Canberra can negotiate sufficient timely stocks, the army could establish a single long-range anti-access battery by the end of 2028.

The army could learn and adapt from the US Army's nascent Typhon system, which is fielding Tomahawks and SM-6s. The navy could even share some of its people to help set up the team and gain valuable experience for its future deployment of the missiles. Supporting systems already being bought for the navy, such as the Theatre Mission Planning Centre and Tactical Tomahawk Weapon Control System, would enable land-based Tomahawk employment, though the army would eventually need its own multi-domain intelligence and targeting staff.

US rotational presence in Australia can potentially help with training and on-the-job experience as the army executes its current plans for maritime firepower and potentially adds to them with navy missiles. That's because the US Army's Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTF) and the US Marine Corps' Marine Littoral Regiments are already being built to apply land-based maritime firepower.

Canberra should pursue more long-term rotations of such units. This would also benefit Washington, since the US Army is yet to find a forward home for its third Indo-Pacific MDTF. Offering to accommodate it might also allow Canberra to gain earlier deliveries of Tomahawks and SM-6s, either new or borrowed from US stocks.

Finally, the navy should generate its own asymmetric maritime force. This would offer a family of clandestine capabilities designed to create surprise and unpredictable advantages from the sea, generated from the naval workforce and by leveraging Australia's defence and civil maritime industry. Many of our allies and major partners have sophisticated naval special-forces capabilities, but we don't. Naval drones used by Ukraine, commercial-like projection platforms for special forces and World War II auxiliary raiders hint at the potential.

A rejoinder to all of this might be that alternative maritime options are already being pursued. The navy's Hobart-class air warfare destroyers will shortly be upgraded with Tomahawks and SM-6s. That's a great development, but there are only three of these ships, each with only 48 vertical launch cells. As the new missiles are added, the ships' combat systems are also being upgraded to Aegis Baseline 9. This will be a lengthy process which won't add firepower depth anytime soon, even if the upgrade runs to schedule.

With asymmetric intent, the navy is also introducing sea mines and extra-large underwater drones. But for each of these equipment categories, there's still an associated military signature in deployment. More novel options cloaked with deception beyond these are still needed.

Delivering faster and cheaper is easier said than done. The proposal argued here would be challenging to put into effect. But with warning time dissipated, we must heed the DSR's call to dispense with business as usual. The government's expanded surface fleet plan is commendable, but trends in Australia's strategic environment won't stop and wait for the 2030s and 2040s. It's time to move faster and think differently.

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As Australia's naval focus moves north, so must missile reloading facilities

Raelene Lockhorst

Image of the destroyer USS *Rafael Peralta* loading a missile at Eden: US Navy.

The Royal Australian Navy needs missile reloading facilities in the north of the country, most obviously at Darwin and Cairns. The southern ports where Australian warships now take on munitions are too far from where the fleet is most likely to fight, though their reloading capabilities must also be retained.

The rising threat from China is shifting the geopolitical focus northwards, to chokepoints between archipelagic islands and to flashpoints in the Western Pacific. Australia must ensure its naval support infrastructure responds.

The lack of northern reloading facilities diminishes the navy's combat capability by throttling its operational tempo.

Warships in action can quickly empty their magazines of air-defence or strike missiles. They might take three days to sail from an operations area north of Australia to Darwin, if they could replenish there; to reach HMAS Stirling, near

Perth, they might need seven days. Then just as much time is spent in returning to the area of operations.

Similar calculations apply for operating in the Southwest Pacific. For that theatre, Cairns would be a far closer location for reloading than Eden, the New South Wales port where the process is currently done for ships using Fleet Base East in Sydney.

Intense, high-tempo operations in the north are just not possible when tied to the more southerly facilities.

Darwin and Cairns are prime candidates for northern missile reloading facilities because each has a deep port and is already equipped with substantial defence infrastructure. To the extent that they must already be protected against air and missile attack, there would be no further burden in protecting new facilities.

Both cities also play key roles in Australia's strategic partnerships, particularly with the United States, which regularly conducts joint operations and training in the region. So building missile reloading facilities at these locations would enhance interoperability with allied forces, particularly under the AUKUS framework.

Indeed, it is quite likely that the US Navy would want to use northern Australian missile reloading facilities in the event of war, if Australia had any.

Australia should also keep its southern installations, however, because the ships are mainly based in the south. In war, the southern facilities would offer redundancy in case of damage or destruction of the better-placed northern ones.

The specific infrastructure needed for reloading at Darwin and Cairns would mainly be the specialised storage buildings that are needed for missiles. For security, those buildings would be at nearby defence base, not alongside wharves.

Sending munitions north by truck or train when they're needed is not a suitable alternative. The process could impose delays, and roads and rail lines can be vulnerable.

Developing missile loading installations in the north would significantly improve Australia's deterrence posture and enhance operational flexibility.

The Australian government must take immediate action to address this pressing need. It should look at whether a quick enhancement of current facilities can provide a stop-gap solution.

Then Defence must secure funding to fast-track construction of permanent facilities in the north. Because of the value to the US Navy of missile reloading in northern Australia, the government must involve it in the effort. For example, the US Navy may have special requirements.

This collaboration will not only enhance our operational capabilities but also strengthen our alliance.

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Darwin as a regional sustainment centre

Social licence is key to building defence in the north

Luke Gosling

Image: Corporal Madhur Chitnis/Department of Defence.

Defence must improve its social licence in the Northern Territory to operate more effectively and tackle under-utilisation and under-development of local capability. The increase in military investment and activities that is underway in the Territory provides an opportunity to shift the dial beyond simply generating more work for Territorians to building enduring partnerships between Defence and the local community.

In short, Defence must cooperate more closely with the north to improve infrastructure and supply chain resilience, as called for in the National Defence Strategy.

While current Defence spending contributes at least 10 percent of the territory's gross product, the economic and social contribution of Defence and national security activities in the north remain under-recognised by local residents and operate below potential. Likewise, the capability benefits accrued from greater local integration of defence and security activities are being lost.

The $14 billion investment in northern Defence facilities, as outlined in the National Defence Strategy, presents a significant opportunity to embed Defence more firmly within northern Australia's social and economic fabric. In turn, this would benefit defence capability, economic growth and social development.

The more Territorians see defence forces engaging with local businesses and workers, the more they will recognise Defence as a key part of the northern economy and communities. They will also welcome collaboration with Defence if it provides infrastructure and services that benefit everyone. They will be more understanding of the inconveniences that can result from defence activity, such as loud aircraft noise and traffic hold-ups behind convoys, and more likely to accept the trade-offs inherent in housing developments for defence personnel.

A partnership approach needs to go well beyond localising spending on defence construction projects. Defence capability must be built through improving local industrial capacity as well as expanding and upskilling the workforce.

Long-term commitments for collaboration must be pledged by Defence and the governments of the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland. They must establish lasting partnerships that enhance local capacity, improve the effectiveness of defence industry and benefit local organisations and businesses.

There are many fields in which cooperation and collaboration could deliver sustained benefits.

To start with, Defence should build logistics bases in the north and employ Territorians, rather than establishing them in Victoria, which seems to be the preference.

Another area for collaboration is building resilient supply chains, which would benefit not only Defence capabilities but also local access to more reliable and affordable supermarket supplies. The north's road and rail routes are vulnerable to disruption through extreme weather, accidents and pandemics, resulting in delays, shortages and higher costs. We need a balanced solution that includes the southern logistics node of Bandiana and serious assessment of a central node such as Alice Springs (used by a variety of airlines for storage during the Covid-19 pandemic), plus northern nodes that utilise available land in Greater Darwin close to bases, ports, airports and multi-user loading facilities.

Another area for greater collaboration is improving the north's liveability. Defence forces in the north suffer high rates of transfer requests, resulting in loss of skilled personnel. Defence members and their families cite difficulties in spouse employment and inadequate defence housing, as well as poor access to and quality of education and health and family services. Some of these issues are improving, but others, such as air connectivity and affordability, are getting worse, and we must continue to lean in.

Defence and the north must also collaborate on building accommodation for the workers engaged in the construction of military facilities. Although many will be on short-term contracts, travelling from elsewhere in Australia, they still need quality housing. Authorities should reach out to local Darwin companies who have the means to establish off-grid, fully self-contained camps.

Greater engagement with First Nations people is also needed as defence capability is built across the north.

As the tempo of defence activities and multi-nation joint exercises continues to increase, so too will the need for enhanced medical services. Defence is already investing in day-to-day medical centres to care for Australian and foreign personnel. This has benefitted local healthcare through increased availability of defence-contracted medical personnel who want to remain current in community medicine. Investments must continue to be made in the north's rapid medical evacuation services and critical care facilities.

There are good reasons why successful approaches to local procurement need to evolve further. A more collaborative approach between Defence and its contractors would better address the challenges in achieving on-time and on-budget delivery in the north. Defence must establish cooperation in the early stages of project design and throughout delivery and avoid adversarial relationships that can sometimes characterise traditional contracting.

The economic impact of greater local engagement is highlighted in a 2023 study by the Master Builders Association. This involves maintaining and growing the Northern Territory's share of Defence contracts, continuing to improve contract conditions for local firms, and training more workers locally and attracting them from interstate. There also needs to be a strategy to engage Northern Territory firms in advanced manufacturing of equipment and parts.

Deeper collaboration with the north would not only strengthen Defence capability but also improve

social licence with local businesses, communities and defence personnel, which in turn will help align them in supporting a stronger, more sustainable Defence presence in the region—a key direction of the National Defence Strategy.

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Darwin is key for undersea data links. We must promote their resilience there

John Coyne

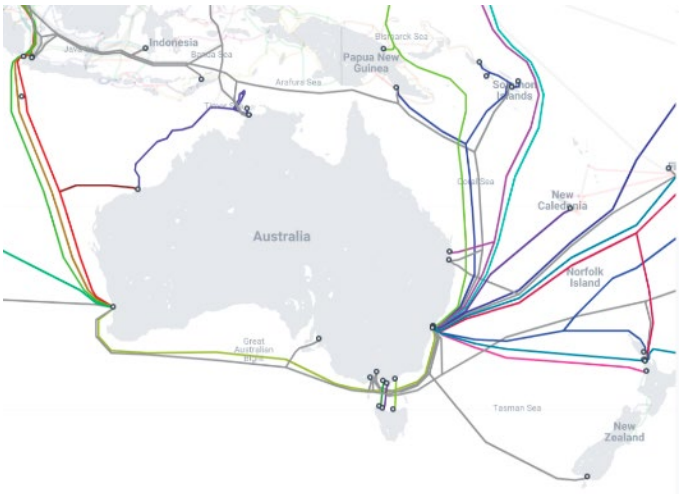

Image: TeleGeography.

Australia needs further investment into Darwin's digital infrastructure to leverage the city's proximity to Asia and support the resilience of international data flow through subsea cables.

Actions should include establishing an office to coordinate industry and government agencies, and it should build a substantial capability in Darwin to repair cables.

The importance of acting is underscored by Google's November statement that it would lay a data cable from Darwin to Singapore via Christmas Island and by ongoing joint efforts by Australia, the United States and Japan to increase connectivity in the Pacific.

As subsea links, such as the existing Darwin-Jakarta-Singapore Cable, become Australia's digital lifelines, their security and resilience become paramount. Disruption to them would have profound consequences for both Australia's economy and national security.

Darwin's role in the Indo-Pacific digital ecosystem is growing ever faster, making the city increasingly central to global data flows. Vulnerabilities come with dependence on such infrastructure. Incapacitation of these cables—whether through physical damage or cyber threats—would severely affect Australia's economy, security, and geopolitical standing.

The government's current approach to managing subsea cable security lacks the coordination needed to address the growing challenges in this space. With multiple agencies involved, from the Department of Infrastructure to the Australian Communications and Media Authority, Australia needs a more unified and proactive approach to safeguarding these assets.

Given the national security stakes, Australia must establish a dedicated domestic subsea cable coordination unit to oversee construction, maintenance and security. This unit should serve as a clearinghouse, working closely with key government stakeholders, telecommunications regulators and private sector players—including major tech firms, such as Google and Meta. By integrating their expertise, the unit could ensure that subsea cables were shielded from physical and cyber threats, coordinating national security efforts and fostering a unified response to emerging risks.

As Darwin continues to evolve as a data hub, Australia's capacity to swiftly repair damage to its subsea cables is becoming increasingly critical. To maintain resilience, the government must establish a local repair hub. This includes building up domestic repair capabilities, which could be achieved through partnerships with international cable operators or by developing local expertise within the Northern Territory. A dedicated repair ship, staffed with a rapid-response team based in Darwin, would be invaluable, ensuring that cable damage was addressed quickly to minimise disruption. This approach would further strengthen Australia's position as a reliable player in the global digital infrastructure arena.

To support this growing digital infrastructure, Darwin's physical and digital capabilities must also be scaled up. This requires robust terrestrial backhaul connections and investment by large cloud-service providers in world-class

AI data centres. We also need a regulatory framework that supports the increasing volume of data while addressing potential physical and cyber threats.

The Northern Territory offers geological stability and an advantageous position for connections to Singapore, itself an important node in the global submarine cable network. These advantages make it an ideal place for increasing Australia's overall telecommunications and subsea cable resilience by diversifying submarine cable landings from clogged areas like Sydney and existing areas like Perth.

As the volume of data flowing through the region rises, so too must the capacity to handle it securely and efficiently. Strong, resilient infrastructure will not only bolster Australia's own security but position the country as a reliable alternative to higher-risk regions. It will also attract investment and foster deeper international partnerships, particularly with allies such as the United States and Japan, who are already deeply engaged in securing subsea cable infrastructure.

Australia must also step up its role in the global dialogue surrounding subsea cable security. Given the interconnectedness of these cables and their importance to international trade and security, it cannot afford to act in isolation. Active participation in global initiatives is essential. For example, in September, Australia endorsed the New York Statement on Undersea Cables, which calls for international cooperation to safeguard the links.

By engaging in these discussions, Australia can share insights on emerging threats, establish best practices for protection and help shape global responses to subsea cable disruptions. This leadership would further cement Australia's position as a key partner in global digital infrastructure security.

The time for action is now. Australia's government must move decisively to secure the subsea cable infrastructure of the Northern Territory, ensuring long-term resilience and reliability.

With its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific, Darwin is poised to be a cornerstone of global digital connectivity, not only serving as a gateway for Australia but also reinforcing regional security and economic stability. By securing subsea cable infrastructure, Australia will pave the way for a secure, resilient and interconnected future, reinforcing both its national interests and its partnerships with key allies.

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Realising Darwin's potential as a marine industry hub

John Coyne

Image: Ernesto Sanchez/Department of Defence.

If Australia is serious about defending its interests and shaping its region, building out Darwin's marine industry must be at the forefront of our national agenda.

Darwin is where Australia's northern frontier meets the Indo-Pacific's strategic crossroads. Despite its location, infrastructure and growing defence presence, Darwin falls short of its potential to serve as a sovereign marine industry hub capable of supporting national security, regional engagement and economic resilience.

The Northern Territory government is already making tangible progress. By releasing its Maritime Industry Development Plan and investing in the Darwin Ship Lift, it has laid the groundwork for the next phase of maritime industry growth. However, building Darwin's sovereign marine capability requires more than shipyard infrastructure and policy intent.

What's now needed is a coordinated, sustained national effort—led by the Commonwealth, enabled by the NT government and underpinned by private sector investment—to transform Darwin into a critical

maritime node in Australia's defence-industrial and economic architecture.

As the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly contested, supply chains become more vulnerable and coercive statecraft becomes more common. Darwin's proximity to key maritime routes and regional partners makes it an indispensable asset. A robust marine industry in Darwin would allow Australia to project influence, sustain operations and support partners across the northern arc, from the eastern Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. This is not simply about regional economics, but a foundational element of national sovereignty.

The private sector will be important to this process. The sector's investment should include committing capital to expand marine logistics, repair and sustainment services, as well as engaging in equity partnerships with industrial facilities tied to the Darwin Ship Lift. The energy, logistics and resources sectors, which rely on maritime infrastructure to service operations across northern Australia and the Timor Sea, should be at the front of this charge.

Building a marine industry in Darwin will also require people. Skilled labour shortages already constrain the growth of northern Australia's economy across various sectors. Without a coordinated investment in trade training, apprenticeships and Indigenous workforce development, the marine sector will unsustainably depend on external contractors and fly-in-fly-out models. The private sector and the government must collaboratively invest in the future workforce, focusing on emerging maritime technologies, sustainment trades and operational support.

The federal government has a central enabling role. Through the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (NAIF), the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR), and the Department of Defence, Canberra can and must provide the strategic weight and funding necessary to build confidence, de-risk private investment and connect Darwin's marine capability to national strategic priorities.

NAIF must continue to expand its role as a first-mover investor and adopt a proactive approach. This should apply to co-financing infrastructure needed to support industrial-scale ship repair and maintenance, logistics handling and utility upgrades. Rather than reacting to low-risk, late-stage business cases, NAIF must support the first steps where the commercial market fears to tread, but where the national interest demands action.

DISR must integrate Darwin's marine capability into a broader national industrial strategy. Programs such as the Modern Manufacturing Initiative and the National Reconstruction Fund should prioritise investment in dual-use maritime technologies, automation and sovereign sustainment capability to serve commercial and Defence needs. Darwin should be designated a priority industrial precinct for maritime innovation and logistics, linking northern Australia's marine services to Australia's broader manufacturing and resilience goals.

Defence has the most immediate and compelling role. As Australia expands its forward posture in the north—across the Top End, Tindal and the broader Indo-Pacific Defence Network—Defence must commit to sustaining a greater portion of its fleet and autonomous systems in Darwin. The Darwin Ship Lift must be fully integrated into Defence sustainment planning, not as a backup or overflow site, but as a routine component of ADF readiness. In doing so, Defence would provide essential commercial scale and confidence to attract further private investment and talent into the region.

Australia must also confront a growing structural challenge in its naval sustainment network. Henderson in Western Australia is already under pressure from an expanding set of responsibilities, submarine support, surface fleet maintenance and future shipbuilding. As a result, it risks becoming a choke point. A single point of failure at such a critical node carries unacceptable operational risk.

Darwin and Henderson can and should operate in complement, sharing the load, building redundancy and ensuring continuous support to the Royal Australian Navy and allied vessels across both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This is not a question of competition; it's a matter of resilience and reach. A distributed sustainment model, anchored in Darwin, delivers sovereign flexibility in the face of rising operational demand.

Defence must also shape its industry policy and Australian Industry Content requirements to favour local capacity-building. Defence can serve as an anchor client and capability multiplier in the Top End's maritime

future by actively encouraging NT-based contracts, apprenticeships and infrastructure investment.

A thriving marine industry in Darwin does not just serve Defence. It enhances Australia's capacity to support regional humanitarian assistance, disaster response, civil maritime enforcement and economic engagement. Darwin's development has long been framed as a national opportunity. It is now a strategic obligation: Australia cannot afford to leave its north underdone or underutilised. A sovereign, commercially viable, and strategically aligned marine industry in Darwin is no longer aspirational.

Declarations or single-point projects will not deliver this. It will take a coordinated national effort spanning governments, departments and industry partners. It will require risk tolerance, patience and clear-eyed prioritisation, but the economic, strategic and sovereign dividends are considerable.

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Darwin is well-placed for an uncrewed systems hub

John Coyne

Image: Kym Smith/Department of Defence.

Australia often relies on overseas facilities for uncrewed systems' maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO), exposing the country to operational delays, escalating costs and potential security risks. To address this vulnerability, it should establish an MRO facility for uncrewed systems in Darwin.

Uncrewed systems, including drones, uncrewed aerial vehicles and uncrewed underwater vehicles, are transforming Australia's defence, security and commercial sectors. They have a range of applications in defence operations, border security, environmental monitoring and industrial applications such as extraction of natural resources, including natural gas.

Darwin's strategic location, existing infrastructure and proximity to major defence and commercial partners mean it is the ideal hub for maintaining these vital assets.

The city's strategic significance, long recognised by Australia's defence planners, makes it the natural location for a dedicated MRO facility. As the gateway to the Indo-Pacific, Darwin's proximity to regional and global markets, particularly Asia, provides an unparalleled advantage for servicing domestic and international clients.

This places Darwin at the crossroads of Australia's defence and commercial interests in the region, with clear benefits for its role as a logistics and maintenance hub for uncrewed systems. Furthermore, the city's established infrastructure, including air and sea ports, rail connections and utilities, already supports large-scale defence operations and the growing defence footprint in the region, making it primed for expansion into a world-class MRO hub for uncrewed systems.

Australian uncrewed systems are largely serviced overseas, leaving them vulnerable to extended downtimes, longer repair times and increased risk in transportation. This reliance on foreign facilities compromises Australia's operational readiness. It hampers the efficiency of industries, such as resource extraction, that rely heavily on uncrewed technology for monitoring, inspections and surveillance.

As the Australian Defence Force and commercial sectors increasingly deploy uncrewed systems, it is essential to ensure they can be maintained and repaired promptly to avoid delays in operations, whether they involve national security, disaster response or remote infrastructure management.

As uncrewed systems are central to the future of defence operations, creating an MRO facility in Darwin would strengthen Australia's position as a key partner in the region, with the ability to service not only its own uncrewed systems but also those of allied nations. This strategic advantage would provide a competitive edge in defence readiness and international collaborations.

Moreover, Darwin's potential MRO facility could support other government agencies, such as the Australian Federal Police, Home Affairs and the Australian Border Force. They all use uncrewed systems for surveillance, border protection and law enforcement.

The ability to rapidly repair and maintain these systems would improve agencies' responsiveness and availability of capabilities, ensuring that they are always equipped to respond to emerging threats. Darwin could thus play a greater role in Australia's broader security architecture, providing reliable, homegrown support to key domestic and international partners.

From a commercial perspective, establishing an MRO facility in Darwin would be commercially viable and a boon for local businesses.

With the growing demand for uncrewed systems in industries such as liquefied natural gas (LNG), telecommunications and mining, establishing a local MRO facility would significantly reduce the reliance on overseas service providers. This would cut transport costs and ensure faster turnaround of repairs, improving the operational efficiency of these industries.

It would also create a thriving commercial ecosystem around uncrewed systems in the Northern Territory. Local businesses would be able to engage with the growing global market for uncrewed systems, contributing to job creation and the region's economic growth.

For this MRO facility to be commercially successful, it should be designed as a multi-use facility, capable of supporting not only defence and government sectors but also commercial enterprises. This approach would ensure financial sustainability through a diversified revenue stream.

Partnerships with commercial operators in the LNG, mining, and telecommunications sectors could provide steady demand for services.

Moreover, collaborations with international partners—such as the United States, Japan and other Indo-Pacific nations—could provide further opportunities for industry growth, turning Darwin into a regional centre for uncrewed system innovation and service.

Such collaborations could include joint research and development projects, knowledge sharing and training programs, further enhancing the facility's global relevance.

Establishing an MRO facility in Darwin would have significant strategic, economic and operational benefits. It would enhance Australia's defence readiness, reduce its reliance on overseas maintenance services and foster closer collaboration with key regional partners. A local MRO facility would strengthen Australia's ability to respond to threats, contribute to the security of the Indo-Pacific region and support industries that rely on uncrewed systems.

By capitalising on Darwin's strategic location, existing infrastructure and growing importance in regional security, Australia can establish a world-class facility that meets its future needs and reinforces its role as a key player in the Indo-Pacific.

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3

Regional cooperation

No aid without access: transforming Darwin into a regional humanitarian hub

Susan Thomson

Image: Leo Baumgartner/Department of Defence.

As climate volatility increases and regional instability looms, Australia should consider developing Darwin into the Indo-Pacific's leading humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) hub. This will require recognition of Darwin's strategic value beyond defence, funding integrated civilian and military capabilities, and building of resilience to benefit Australia and its neighbours.

Darwin's location has rightly earned it a pivotal role in force posture discussions, particularly concerning the US alliance and Australia's broader defence realignment. But by limiting its use to hard power functions, we're missing opportunities in other areas.

The city is close to some of the most disaster-prone and strategically significant regions on earth: Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In a region experiencing the intensifying effects of climate change, seismic activity, and internal and external pressures on governance, Australia's ability to respond to crises is inseparable from its ability to project soft power. We must use Darwin to its full potential.

Darwin has a strong history of stepping up. In 1999, when crisis erupted in East Timor, Darwin served as the staging ground for Australia's humanitarian and peacekeeping response. In the aftermath of the 2002 Bali bombings, the Royal Darwin Hospital rapidly scaled its capacity to triage

and treat victims flown in from Denpasar, cementing its role in Australia's trauma response network. Today, Darwin hosts the National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre and the Australian Medical Assistance Team, both central to regional disaster response efforts. These aren't symbolic assets but operational capabilities with a track record of saving lives.

But reactive capacity is no longer enough. The Indo-Pacific is entering a period of unprecedented climate and political risk. Extreme weather events, from cyclones to floods, are becoming more frequent and more severe. Political instability in the region, from civil unrest in East Timor to health emergencies in Papua New Guinea—demands fast, flexible and sustained responses. And yet, the logistical capacity to support rapid regional HADR missions remains underdeveloped.

Darwin is ideally suited to serve as a prepositioning and supply staging point. Much of its fuel and supplies arrive by sea, creating a natural nexus for maritime-led HADR logistics. Spending on projects such as the Darwin ship lift will increase the city's ability to support amphibious operations, including disaster relief. Prepositioned stores of emergency goods—for example, portable shelters, medical kits, water purification systems and engineering equipment—would enable immediate surge capacity. This would both boost regional response and enhance northern Australia's own disaster resilience.

Darwin's proximity to regional partners means it is well-placed to facilitate deeper multilateral HADR coordination. Recent exercises such as Exercise Bhakti Kanyini AusIndo 2024 demonstrate what's possible. That exercise brought together Australian, US, and Indonesian military and civilian agencies to simulate a cyclone response. With East Timor, Britain, and PNG observing, the event highlighted a growing regional appetite for interoperable disaster response frameworks. Darwin can and should be the operational anchor for these partnerships, hosting joint exercises and operations.

Darwin could also support aid diplomacy efforts. As US aid programs are being rolled back and China is leveraging infrastructure loans for influence, Australia has an opportunity to prove its commitment to the region. Darwin's HADR capability would send a message: Australia is present, prepared and invested in regional resilience. Soft power isn't built with promises in Canberra press conferences. It's earned in the aftermath of floods, earthquakes and political upheaval when Australia steps up and demonstrates its dedication to its values.

Realising this vision will require action. Australia's HADR architecture is spread thin. The government should prioritise reviews of supply chain vulnerabilities in Darwin, particularly fuel security, cold storage capacity, and access to air and sea lift assets. The federal government should also consider legislating a minimum reserve of critical HADR supplies staged in the north. Larger and more frequent multilateral exercises must be budgeted for, planned for and executed. Coordination between federal and territory governments must be tightened, especially around infrastructure and inter-agency training, creating muscle-memory crisis responses.

There are economic benefits, too. Improved HADR capability in Darwin would increase regional employment, build emergency services capacity, and boost logistics resilience across northern Australia. It would also position Darwin as a centre for humanitarian innovation, enriching our own disaster response capability while filling a niche across the region. In the long term, this aligns with broader regional strategies such as the Pacific step-up and the Partnerships for Infrastructure initiative. HADR readiness isn't just a moral imperative, it's good strategy and good economics.

ASPI's *North of 26 Degrees South* compendiums consistently highlight Darwin's strategic versatility. Past volumes have made the case for Darwin's role in fuel resilience, regional supply chain diversification, and northern basing.

With growing instability in Southeast Asia and an increasingly volatile Pacific, Darwin's value cannot be measured solely in military terms. It must become a national hub for HADR—a launch pad for compassion as much as capability.

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Unlocking the full potential of the ADF's northern ranges and training areas

John Coyne

Image: Gregory Scott/Department of Defence.

The Northern Territory (NT) is one of the world's most exceptional military training environments, offering vast and rugged landscapes ideally suited for large-scale exercises, live-fire drills and complex operations. Defence-owned areas such as Bradshaw Field Training Area and Mount Bundey Training Area have earned global recognition for their ability to support high-intensity training.

Yet the Australian Defence Force is not fully exploiting the potential of these assets. It is underutilising critical resources that could enhance the ADF's operational capabilities and Australia's broader defence posture.

The NT's training areas have been integral to the ADF's operational readiness, providing an ideal environment for training in conventional and irregular warfare. They have long supported complex exercises, testing of diverse military equipment and joint training with allied forces.

However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable reduction in the scale and frequency of ADF exercises in the NT. This decline, compounded by the army's shrinking presence in the NT and competing demands on Defence, has limited the ADF's ability to fully exploit these ranges for high-intensity, combined-arms training, leaving a significant gap in defence readiness.

The underutilisation of the NT's training grounds is particularly clear when compared with the heavy involvement of the US military. Under the US Force Posture Initiatives, the United States has made significant spending in these areas and regularly conducted exercises on them. This engagement reinforces the strategic importance of the NT's ranges, highlighting the gap in the ADF's use of them. Other international partners, particularly Japan, also recognise the value of the ranges. As regional tensions rise, training alongside allies in a location as strategically situated as the NT enhances interoperability and military readiness.

Despite the NT's exceptional training environment and the US forces' frequent use of this advantage, the ADF's commitment to high-intensity exercises in the region has waned. As the Indo-Pacific becomes more geopolitically significant, the NT's ranges should be central to Australia's defence strategy, not secondary assets used infrequently or for limited purposes.

The Australian government and the ADF must act to maximise the utility of the NT's training areas. The ADF must significantly ramp up its commitment to large-scale, complex training exercises in the NT.

To optimise use of the ranges, Australia must increase large-scale exercises in the NT that integrate multiple military services and allies. These exercises should reflect Australia's strategic challenges, such as maritime security, territorial defence and regional stability. A focus on rapid deployment and modern warfare scenarios will ensure that the ADF is prepared to address a broad spectrum of threats, from conventional military conflicts to humanitarian crises and natural disasters.

Equally important is fostering closer collaboration between the Australian government, the ADF and the NT government. As the ADF ramps up its training activities in the region, the NT government must actively support the expansion. The NT's vast, sparsely populated landscape provides a unique opportunity for the ADF to collaborate with local communities and businesses, creating mutually beneficial partnerships.

Expanding military exercises can generate jobs, boost local economies and improve infrastructure, all of which will help sustain the NT's growing role in Australia's defence strategy. It can also stress-test the region's transport

and logistics infrastructure and industry base, while providing economic opportunities for local businesses and communities. The increased ADF activity will also enhance the region's security and emergency response capabilities, providing direct benefits to the local population.

Australia can unlock the full potential of these invaluable resources by revitalising its commitment to these ranges, increasing international cooperation and fostering stronger partnerships with the NT government and local communities. A comprehensive policy approach, focused on increased training activity and stronger collaboration with both domestic and international partners, will ensure that the NT remains central to Australia's defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. This will enhance the ADF's operational readiness, strengthen relationships with key allies, and solidify Australia's role as an important player in regional security.

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The future of US facilities in northern Australia

Susan Thomson

Image: Jesse Kane/Department of Defence.

As the Indo-Pacific becomes the defining theatre of 21st-century strategic competition, northern Australia has emerged as a crucial area for US force projection and deterrence. But while their presence offers undeniable strategic value, it also raises serious questions about infrastructure strain, sovereignty and Australia's long-term role in US defence planning, particularly under the Trump administration. If the US presence is to serve Australia's national interests, we must lead a transparent, whole-of-government conversation about purpose, risks, and the public investments required to support this presence.

The bases and facilities hosting US forces include: RAAFs Learmonth, Curtin, Tindal, Scherger, and Townsville; the US Marines training facilities in Darwin; the communications facility North West Cape; and most famously Pine Gap. Darwin hosts up to 2,500 US Marines every dry season for training purposes. AUKUS has created the legitimate possibility of another joint facility, potentially a submarine maintenance facility, presenting a significant advantage for US submarine capability.

Strategically positioned, these bases and facilities are located either for their proximity to the Indo-Pacific, enabling rapid access and regional engagement, or because their remoteness presents significant challenges for potential adversaries. In some cases, their climate also offers unique advantages for military training, scientific research and capability development.

There's been long-standing and legitimate public concern in Australia about the national security and sovereignty risks posed by the presence of US bases and facilities on our soil. Not since the influential work of Desmond Ball in the 1980s and 1990s has there been a sustained national conversation on the strategic consequences of hosting US defence infrastructure. Ball's core question—whether the risks of retaliation from US adversaries are adequately offset by US willingness to defend these sites—sparked an essential public debate on whether such facilities ultimately safeguard or endanger Australia. That conversation, once central, has faded. It is now time to renew it—not to end or restrict the alliance, but to ensure there is continued public understanding, scrutiny and support for Australia's evolving strategic posture and the role these facilities play in it.

The decision to allow US deployments and the presence of joint facilities on Australian soil remains an independent one. These arrangements are governed by Australian law, subject to government oversight, and reflect choices made in pursuit of our national interest. Hosting allied forces does not diminish sovereignty; it exercises it. Australia retains the authority to set the terms, conditions and limits of these partnerships, including how and when bases are

used. The real challenge lies not in maintaining sovereignty, but in ensuring that decisions are made transparently, with public understanding and consent, and in alignment with long-term national priorities. The second challenge is ensuring that this understanding is communicated clearly to the public and not hijacked by misinformation, conspiracy theories or polarised political narratives.

The broader conversation on the nature of the United States' defence posture in Australia warrants continued and thorough debate. The nature of what happens at, passes through, and can be actioned from the bases and facilities has burst into public debate in light of the US's involvement in the Israel-Iran war. Given the Trump administration's fast and loose interpretation of law and rules-based order, there is reason to be concerned about the effects on Australia's sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the feasibility and practicality of hosting US forces in Australia should be more closely interrogated. The growing US military presence in northern Australia brings both economic opportunities and strategic alignment, but also significant infrastructure liabilities. While joint training and rotational deployments inject capital into the local economy, they also place considerable strain on public systems that are already under pressure. Darwin's sewage system is at capacity, the electricity grid is increasingly stressed, and water shortages remain a persistent—and likely worsening—challenge.

Seasonal flooding regularly disrupts the Northern Territory's road networks, degrading conditions for civilian use and leaving them highly vulnerable to damage from military logistics and heavy equipment. Large-scale exercises such as Pitch Black expose these vulnerabilities, revealing the fragility of the current infrastructure.

If the expansion of US and Australian defence activities in the north is a serious response to China's regional ambitions, it must be matched by an equally serious and coordinated commitment to upgrading the civilian infrastructure that underpins it. Transparency across local, state and territory, and federal governments on both the benefits and burdens of this presence is essential to long-term sustainability, community trust and operational resilience.

Australian governments at all levels should openly discuss the presence of US bases and facilities, what they want out of these facilities, and how they plan to mitigate the drawbacks.

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Access to Northern Territory can be a military asset for Japan

Bernice Kissinger

Image: Leading Aircraftwoman Taylor Anderson/Department of Defence.

As Japan steps up military cooperation with the United States and Australia in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific, the Northern Territory is becoming strategically more important.

From it, forces can reach into the Indian or Pacific oceans, including the South China Sea. Its location is also ideal for military units, including Japan's and India's, to meet and exercise with acceptable transit time.

For the Japanese and US militaries, northern Australia allows access to key Australian Defence Force bases, vast air, land and maritime training ranges, and essential logistic support and maintenance facilities. Importantly, the north has a history of hosting and supporting large multinational activities and exercises.

The Australian government recently announced an acceleration and expansion of funding for hardening existing bases and facilities in the territory, as well as developing new ones. In addition, the Australian and territory governments are embarking on an ambitious plan there to build a digital economy and associated infrastructure, all of which will be available to support military operations. This is aimed at promoting

employment and economic growth and supporting resiliency and security across the north.

Japan is the first country to be formally considered for joining AUKUS Pillar 2, aimed at breakthrough technological advances apart from nuclear submarines. The move reflects the interest of Australia, Britain and the United States in tapping into Japan's strong industrial and technological capacity. It also reflects Tokyo's willingness to join more allied security arrangements amid worsening provocations by China and North Korea.

On 2 May, US, Japanese and Australian defence ministers signed a trilateral Research, Development, Test and Evaluation Projects Arrangement, reinforcing their technological cooperation.

Testing and evaluation may indeed be one area where the Northern Territory can benefit Japan, notably with the Royal Australian Air Force's Delamere Air Weapons Range, comprising more than 2000 square kilometres south of Katherine. It's far from strong sources of electromagnetic interference—and from foreign aircraft and ships that might loiter near the coast to pick up signals. The Australian Army's Bradshaw Field Training Area, roughly the size of Belgium, offers multidomain training and exercising options and is frequently used in major exercises in the north.

In increasingly cooperating with the United States and Australia, Japan's initial focus will be on development and sharing of advanced capabilities in such areas as hypersonics, anti-submarine warfare, cyberweapons, quantum computing and artificial intelligence. Military-technological cooperation with Britain will also deepen if Japan does begin to work in AUKUS Pillar 2.

Examples of Japan's earlier achievements in defence technology include the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries F-2 fighter, the AAM-4B air-to-air missile and the Taigei submarine class with lithium-ion batteries.

Japan has made significant strides in space technology, which has both civilian and military applications. The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and innovative Japanese companies are further developing satellite-based intelligence and surveillance capabilities.

The Northern Territory has a proven space launch facility, the Arnhem Space Centre. The centre offers launches to equatorial orbits, among others, is in a remote area with almost no commercial overflight and importantly is supported by the local traditional owners. There is the potential to expand its use for hypersonic test and evaluation, including linking it to existing ADF areas.

Like all modern militaries, the ADF requires fast, secure data links connecting its naval, air and ground forces to each other and to allied forces, many of which are or will be based in the Northern Territory. Data sharing among Allies is critical for civil and military collaboration and for Australian-Japanese-US joint multi-domain defence. Japan and Australia will need to depend on each other's data and its security during regional crises.

To help strengthen the defence ecosystem, the territory government is investing in and supporting a range of initiatives that will also be useful to the forces of Japan, the United States and others when operating in the Top End.

An example is the Inligo Networks ACC-1 project. This is a network of cable connections across the Indo-Pacific that bypass the congested cable network in the South China Sea. Key nodes will include Guam, continental United States, the Philippines, Japan, Indonesia and East Timor, all connected to a landing station in Darwin. This will be particularly important to militaries operating in the Northern Territory.

Connectivity is incomplete without storage capability. The government is working with data centre operator NEXTDC as it develops a flagship facility in Darwin to provide 100 percent uptime plus fast, secure and flexible access to major cloud platforms. This will be a first for the Top End and an invaluable asset to Australia's nearby allies.

Other projects in the pipeline will provide much needed critical infrastructure in the territory to support and enable our military and those of our allies and partners, including Japan.

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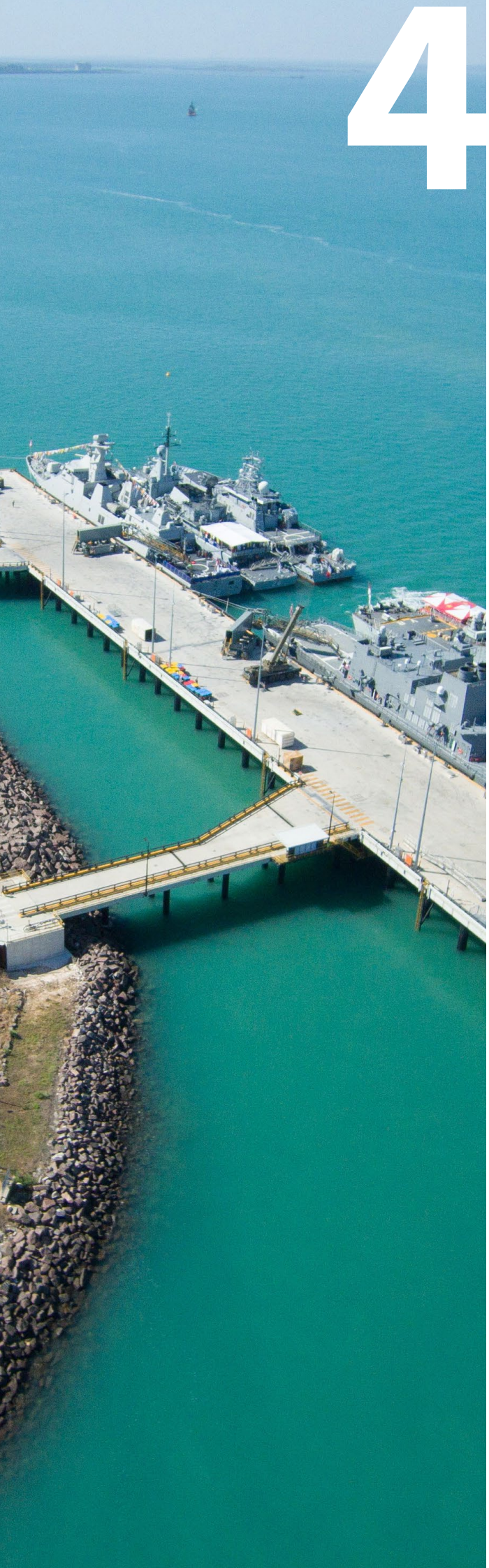

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Defence investment in the North

It’s a wrap: NT Defence Week 2025

Raelene Lockhorst

Image: Jacqueline Forrester/Department of Defence.

Australia’s future security will be decided as much in Darwin as in Canberra. NT Defence Week 2025 made that reality unmistakably clear, showcasing the Northern Territory not as a remote outpost, but as the operational heart of Australia’s Indo-Pacific defence posture.
To translate this momentum into lasting capability, government and industry must act with intent: investing in sovereign infrastructure, locking in supply chains and treating the north as the strategic asset it truly is.

Last week, more than 400 national and international government and industry representatives gathered in Larrakia Country to attend the Northern Australia Defence Summit and multiple supporting events hosted by DefenceNT, the Department of Defence, and industry leaders. The gathering collectively recognised the NT’s strategic importance and vitality in the regional security framework.

DefenceNT has set a clear and strategically aligned agenda to strengthen the NT’s role as a frontline enabler of Australia’s Indo-Pacific defence posture. Central to this is developing robust logistics and pre-positioning capabilities, which are vital for ensuring the Australian Defence Force and its partners can respond rapidly and decisively across a contested and dynamic region. The focus on army littoral manoeuvre basing reflects a

pragmatic understanding of the operational demands of maritime and archipelagic warfare.

Attracting defence industry supply chains and accelerating investment in the northern bases pipeline are not only strategic necessities but present economic opportunities as well. Deepening integration with the United States through force posture initiatives, alongside expanding partnerships with Japan and other trusted regional partners, reinforces the territory's position as a cornerstone of regional deterrence and collective security.

NT Defence Week 2025 demonstrated the NT's strategic value, highlighting the depth of local capability and the untapped potential of northern industry. Direct engagement with defence stakeholders reinforced that resilient, locally anchored supply chains are crucial to sustaining future ADF operations. The rollout of new defence platforms has created a surge in demand for maintenance and sustainment services, opening the door to long-term regional economic and strategic benefits. Panel discussions addressed key enablers, including infrastructure development, regional collaboration and the ability to support a persistent operational presence. Across the week, one message was clear: certainty in project pipelines beyond current forward estimates is essential to unlocking industry investment and aligning northern development with the goals of the Integrated Investment Program, which guides investment to support the National Defence Strategy.

Defence capability in the NT is inseparable from infrastructure supporting energy, transport, water, digital connectivity, and sovereign industrial capacity. The NT is uniquely suited to support sustained multi-domain operations, from the Beetaloo Basin and renewable energy networks, to liquid fuel supply chains and strategic logistics hubs such as Darwin Port and Middle Arm. Water security initiatives and digital technologies such as undersea cables further enhance the territory's operational resilience, while its strength in critical minerals, agribusiness, and space technology makes it dual-purpose powerhouse for national defence and economic security.

However, the scale of investment required to fully realise this potential exceeds what Defence alone can deliver under the current Integrated Investment Program. This creates an opening for private sector to lead the development of dual-use infrastructure, particularly in liquid fuel production, logistics connectivity, sovereign manufacturing, and sustainment hubs. Unlocking this opportunity demands greater certainty from Defence on project timelines and funding beyond existing forward estimates.

As NT Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro stated during the event, the NT is not a remote outpost; it is Australia's frontline in the Indo-Pacific. That view was reinforced by retired US Marine Corps Lieutenant General John Wissler, who described the territory as an essential launch point for integrated, long-range operations across all five domains.

NT Defence Week 2025 made unequivocally clear that the territory is indispensable to Australia's long-term defence strategy. Turning that recognition into action demands sustained partnerships, targeted investment, and a shared commitment to building the north as a strategic asset—not just for today, but for decades to come.

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Northern Australia's economic revival can support defence readiness

Raelene Lockhorst

Image of Beetaloo Basin: Tamboran Resources via Tamboran_TBN/X.

Two blueprints that could redefine the Northern Territory's economic future were launched last week. The first was a government-led economic strategy and the other an industry-driven economic roadmap.

Both highlight that supporting the Northern Territory is not just an economic necessity; it is a national security imperative. By aligning defence priorities and economic development, Australia can ensure the Northern Territory

is a resilient and self-sufficient pillar of our national defence strategy.

The Northern Territory Government's *Economic Strategy 2025* sets out a determined investment plan to drive economic growth using the Territory's natural resources, strategic location and emerging industries. It prioritises renewable energy, critical minerals, transport and digital connectivity, tourism, and workforce capacity building. These areas are intended to enhance trade links with Asian markets and achieve annual growth in gross state product that exceeds national GDP growth.

Simultaneously, the Darwin Major Business Group's *What the Territory Needs 2025* roadmap presents an industry-led approach to the Territory's economic revitalisation focusing on defence, agriculture and critical minerals. By upgrading Darwin Port and expanding renewable energy projects, it seeks to establish the Territory as a trade and energy hub while aligning with national security priorities to attract federal funding and international partnerships.

Both strategies recognise the Territory's role in Australia's defence posture and the fact that the Territory's economic strength underpins national security. Revitalisation of the Territory could reduce reliance on imports, sustain defence operations and reinforce Australia's ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific.

But progress to transform Northern Australia into a hardened defence hub is slow and limited to enabling infrastructure contained within the defence estate. For example, Defence has earmarked billions over the coming decade to strengthen northern bases. Beyond this, secure energy, stable digital connectivity, reliable water supply and resilient transport networks are required to sustain military operations and accommodate extreme demand surges during joint training exercises.

Defence investment in the Northern Territory cannot operate in isolation. Without a strong economy to sustain it, Defence will struggle to reach its full posting potential. The Territory needs affordable housing, healthcare, education and job opportunities for defence families and industry. Otherwise, recruitment and retention will suffer, places such as Darwin and Katherine will continue to be considered 'hardship' postings, and the Territory will be unable to build the workforce needed to support a growing Defence presence.

Both economic strategies recognise that private sector investment must be mobilised alongside government funding. The industry-led strategy can ensure a faster, more agile approach to infrastructure development by using private capital, streamlining regulations and incentivising business. Encouraging the private sector to co-invest in dual-use infrastructure—ports, airstrips and logistics hubs—will create lasting economic benefits while supporting defence capabilities.

Unlocking the Territory's vast critical mineral reserves and energy resources must also be framed in a national security context. The Beetaloo Basin's gas potential and the Territory's deposits of rare earth elements can contribute to energy security and domestic manufacturing growth and self-resilience. The Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage project ensures reliable potable water supplies for defence bases, training areas and disaster response operations. This shows how infrastructure investment can serve both economic and military needs.

The Northern Territory has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to become Australia's northern powerhouse for defence and critical minerals. But success will require sustained bipartisan support and collaboration between government, industry and Defence. The window for action is narrowing. As regional tensions rise and global competition for supply chain sovereignty intensifies, Australia must seize the opportunity to strengthen its northern frontier.

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Force multiplier: the case for multi-use infrastructure in northern Australia

Raelene Lockhorst

Image: PTE Hayes/Department of Defence.

Northern Australia's resilience in the face of crises depends not only on military facilities but on a network of civil infrastructure—ports, liquid-fuel facilities, airfields and logistics hubs that keep people, goods, and equipment moving.

Whether a crisis is military, environmental or humanitarian, northern Australia can hardly cope without them.

Increasingly, the question for Defence is not simply how to access and use these assets in an emergency, but how to shape their development from the outset—especially as more infrastructure is privately owned and operated. This requires moving beyond last-minute requisitioning and towards early engagement during project feasibility and planning, ensuring designs incorporate features that enable rapid military activation without undermining commercial viability.

Northern Australia's vast distances and sparse population make duplication of infrastructure costly and inefficient. Multi-use or common-use assets—where capacity is shared under agreed terms—can deliver more capability at lower cost to government. Dual-use facilities, designed for both civilian and Defence purposes, can serve as a strategic multiplier when access rules and technical specifications are aligned with national security needs. Defence already relies heavily on civilian assets. The rearming of a Canadian warship from Darwin Port during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025, and a similar operation in Broome the year prior, demonstrated the operational value of ensuring commercial facilities are Defence-ready.

Several current projects illustrate the potential for civil–military use. In Townsville, the Queensland Resources Common User Facility, designed to accelerate commercialisation of critical minerals production, can be configured to support Defence supply chains in a contingency if security, storage, and transport features are incorporated early. Darwin's Middle Arm Precinct, planned as a multi-industry hub for renewable energy, low-carbon fuels, advanced manufacturing and critical minerals processing, will also host a ship lift useable for maintenance of private and Defence vessels.

In Western Australia, the Gascoyne Gateway Marine Complex, a privately funded, veteran-founded deep-water port near Harold E Holt naval communications facility and RAAF Learmonth, is designed for both commercial cargo and allied naval use, with integrated fuel and storage facilities. Further north, the Cockatoo Island Supply Base in the Kimberley, combining a deep-water port, airfield, and fuel infrastructure, will support offshore energy, border surveillance, Defence logistics, and emergency services.

These projects demonstrate how infrastructure designed with flexibility and resilience in mind can serve multiple markets over decades, particularly when backed by patient investors willing to wait for long-term returns.

Despite these opportunities, Defence's engagement with infrastructure development remains sporadic and reactive. Without a deliberate policy framework, assets may be built to specifications that limit military utility, located in strategically sub-optimal places, or governed by access arrangements that slow response times in a crisis.

Governments must embed Defence in early-stage planning for major infrastructure projects in northern Australia, establishing clear technical and security standards that can be incorporated into commercial builds and negotiate long-term access agreements with owners and operators. This also means that Defence must pay for enhancements which it needs but commercial customers don't. It needs to pay up front or agree in advance on usage charges that justify the cost of the special features for the developer.

In an era of contested supply chains, extreme weather and regional uncertainty, critical infrastructure will be as

vital to national security as any weapons system. Building this capability in Northern Australia requires more than opportunistic use; it demands deliberate, coordinated planning that aligns commercial development with strategic priorities. Early, sustained engagement between Defence, state and territory governments, and private investors is the only way to ensure the infrastructure we build today can strengthen our resilience to future challenges.

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About the authors

Guy Boekenstein was the first Australian Defence civilian to graduate from the Japanese government National Defense Studies Institute and is the Australian director for Armatus, which focuses on military application of dual-use technology.

John Coyne is the Director of National Security Programs at ASPI and inaugural Head of the Northern Australia Strategic Policy Centre.

Luke Gosling OAM is the member for Solomon and is the Special Envoy for Defence, Veterans' Affairs and Northern Australia.

Bernice Kissinger is a senior fellow with ASPI's Northern Australia Policy Centre and has decades of experience working in the defence and national security technology and innovation sector in the US and Japan.

Raelene Lockhorst is the Deputy Director of National Security Programs at ASPI and has extensive experience in planning complex defence infrastructure and capability acquisition projects.

Thomas Lonergan is a former Australian Army officer and the author of *Ambitiously grey: Pursuing an active Australian military approach in the grey-zone.*

Jennifer Parker is a defence and national security expert associate at the ANU's National Security College and an Adjuct Fellow in Naval Studies at the University of New South Wales. She has served for more than 20 years as a warfare officer in the Royal Australian Navy.

Susan Thomson is a National Security Program Program Coordinator at ASPI.

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