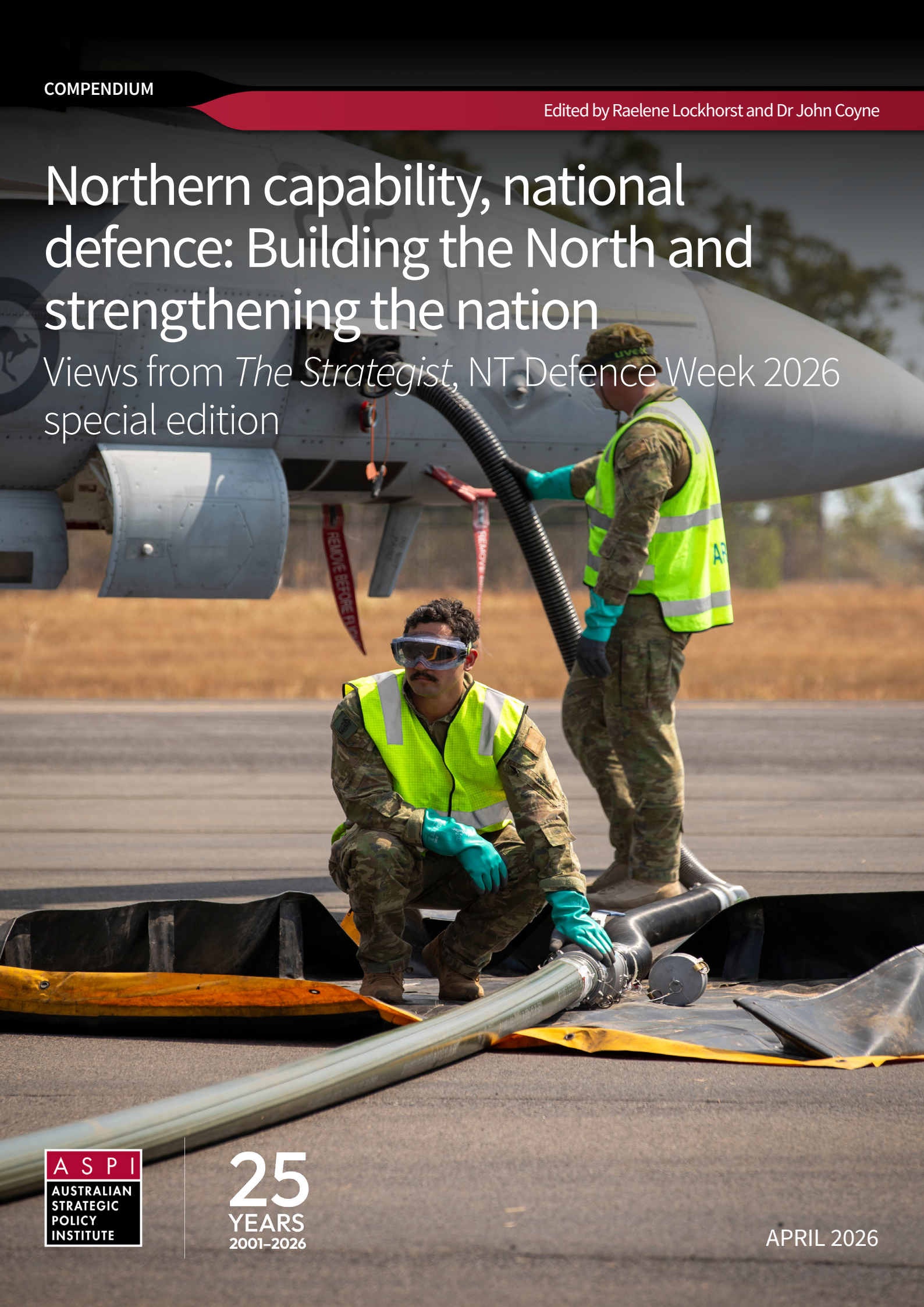
COMPENDIUM

Edited by Raelene Lockhorst and Dr John Coyne

Northern capability, national defence: Building the North and strengthening the nation

Views from *The Strategist*, NT Defence Week 2026 special edition



ASPI
AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

25 YEARS
2001–2026

APRIL 2026

Acknowledgements

ASPI would like to thank the Northern Territory Government for its support of the Northern Australia Strategic Policy Centre, without which the 'North of 26 south' Strategist series would not be possible.

Sincere thanks also to Francesca Cuiffetelli and Iris Reinhold for their coordination of this special edition, *The Strategist* editorial team for their hard work in publishing the articles and to the individual authors for taking time out of their busy schedules to contribute to the series. This report was produced with funding support from the Northern Territory Government.

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First published April 2026
Published in Australia by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute
ISSN: 3083-2578 (Online), 3083-2586 (Print)

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Cover image: Defence image library, online.

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Foreword

The Hon Lia Finocchiaro MLA
Chief Minister, Northern Territory

Northern Australia is central to Australia's national defence, and the Northern Territory sits at its operational heart. From Darwin Harbour to RAAF Base Tindal, from our training areas and ranges to our ports, roads and logistics corridors, the Territory underpins Australia's ability to project, sustain and integrate force across our northern approaches.

That role is not theoretical. Australia's defence strategy demands readiness, resilience and speed, and nowhere is better positioned to deliver that outcome at scale than the Northern Territory.

NT Defence Week 2026 reflects that reality. It brings together Defence, industry, government and international partners with a clear focus on how Australia translates strategy into operational effect. It is about execution, including the workforce, infrastructure and systems that allow Australia and its allies to operate forward, sustain longer and remain on task in the Indo-Pacific.

Defence is not a standalone activity in the Territory; it is a core pillar of our economy, contributing nearly ten percent of gross state product and shaping our infrastructure, workforce and industry development. Across the Territory, broader defence investment in enabling infrastructure, logistics networks, industrial capability and skilled labour is strengthening Australia's capacity to operate, sustain and project force from the north. A stronger Territory economy directly supports a stronger defence posture, and a stronger defence presence drives long-term economic opportunity for Territorians.

The Northern Marine Complex, including the Darwin Ship Lift, is one of the most strategically important defence investments in northern Australia. It represents a step change in Australia's ability to sustain naval, littoral and allied forces in theatre. Conducting maintenance, repair and recovery in Darwin converts transit time into operational availability, strengthening national resilience, lifting local industry capability and creating skilled jobs that endure beyond individual projects.

Our community understands defence in practical terms. We have hosted major operations, sustained allied rotations and supported Defence through surge periods. Local workers, businesses and supply chains already deliver the engineering, logistics and sustainment that defence capability depends on. This lived experience shapes our clear-eyed approach. Defence effectiveness relies on the strength of the civilian economy that supports it.

The Northern Territory stands ready to meet that challenge. We are focused on maritime sustainment, theatre logistics, littoral capability and northern basing, backed by streamlined approvals and a clear commitment to delivery. We are unapologetically pro-Territory because a strong north secures Australia.

NT Defence Week 2026 is an opportunity to sharpen priorities, strengthen partnerships and turn intent into outcomes. I commend this compendium to all those committed to ensuring the Northern Territory remains ready, resilient and indispensable to Australia's national defence.

Introduction

Dr John Coyne

Northern Australia will decide whether Australia can sustain combat power where it matters most or fail to do so before tempo can be maintained. Policy has settled on the importance of geography. Execution will determine the outcome. The Northern Territory sits at the centre of that challenge, not as a remote frontier but as the system that must generate, sustain and project combat power into the Indo-Pacific.

Strategy has moved north with clarity and consistency across successive policy documents. Capability, infrastructure, workforce and industry haven't kept pace. That gap defines the strategic risk. Closing it requires discipline, sequencing and a shared understanding of how the north functions as an integrated operating system rather than a collection of assets.

There remains a persistent tension in how Australia approaches the north. Some still view it as too far, too hot and too expensive. Others publicly support strategic statements about its importance while avoiding the harder work of execution. Both positions produce the same outcome: drift. These instincts prioritise efficiency over survivability and distance over preparedness.

Without execution, strategy is mere aspiration.

The contributions in this volume move beyond explanation. They test whether Australia has built the systems required to operate in the north under stress.

The Northern Territory anchors that system. Darwin, Tindal and Katherine form its operational spine. Defence training areas such as Bradshaw and Delamere provide scale and realism. Ports, airfields, fuel storage and logistics corridors connect the territory to Southeast Asia and to the national industrial base. Geography provides proximity and access. Only integrated systems deliver readiness.

Fragmentation creates friction. Friction slows tempo. Slowed tempo creates vulnerability.

That vulnerability emerges through a chain of dependencies.

A posture that cannot sustain itself fails first. Forward basing and rotational presence signal intent, but operations depend on not just fuel stock but also protected logistics corridors, resilient energy systems and maintenance capacity that can operate under pressure. Australia still treats fuel as a stockholding problem rather than a system that must function when disrupted. Northern Australia sits at the centre of that system with limited redundancy. Without sustainment, posture collapses.

Infrastructure determines whether sustainment holds. Air bases, ports and training areas must function as a connected network. Runways require assured fuel and munitions supply. Ports require inland transport corridors that can move heavy loads at tempo. Data systems must operate in the face of persistent disruption. A hardened asset that cannot connect to the system remains a point of failure.

The workforce determines whether the infrastructure operates. Strategy has shifted forward. The permanent workforce hasn't yet. Rotational presence demonstrates commitment but provides no depth. A thinner permanent base reduces the system's ability to scale under pressure. Housing, schooling, spousal employment and career pathways will determine whether the north can sustain the workforce required to generate capability in theatre.

Industry determines whether the system can expand. Northern Australia will not develop a resilient defence industrial ecosystem through aspiration. Industry invests where demand is predictable. Without a clear northern theatre logistics concept, fuel suppliers, freight operators and maintenance providers cannot scale. Without that scale, sustainment capacity remains constrained.

Alliance integration determines whether the system can operate at speed. The United States has invested heavily in northern Australia through force posture initiatives. Australian capability must match that commitment. Sovereign resilience requires Australia to anchor the system, not simply host it. Sustainment, logistics and industrial integration will determine whether allied forces can operate cohesively under pressure.

Failure to close these gaps will not result in mere delay; it will produce a force that cannot sustain operations beyond initial deployment.

Northern Australia connects national strategy to operational reality. It sits closer to Southeast Asian sea lanes than to southern capitals. It provides direct access to the archipelagic arc, where deterrence will be contested. It links southern industrial capacity to forward operations through critical logistics corridors. That position makes it indispensable.

These dependencies converge on a single conclusion. Australia must move from incremental upgrades to systemic design.

The concept for that system should be what an ASPI report in March called the Northern Engine, a fully integrated defence ecosystem capable of launching, sustaining, repairing and innovating military power across the Indo-Pacific. Northern Australia must launch and lodge forces, sustain and repair them, test and innovate, and connect domestic industry to forward operations. These functions must operate together. Without them, Australia cannot sustain operations beyond the initial phase of conflict.

NT Defence Week 2026 provides a disciplined forum to test that system. It brings policymakers, Defence leaders, industry and allies into the geography where strategy must be executed. Darwin does not host an abstract debate. It hosts operational reality.

Participants confront the infrastructure, logistics corridors and workforce constraints that will determine outcomes.

NT Defence Week must function as a decision-making environment, not a conference.

The event serves three functions.

It interrogates readiness. Participants should use this opportunity to define what a networked and hardened northern posture delivers in operational terms. They need to identify single points of failure across fuel, logistics, workforce and infrastructure. They must prioritise investments that reduce system-level risk rather than optimise individual projects.

It aligns stakeholders. Defence, governments, industry and allies must operate from a common operating picture of the north. Shared understanding enables coordinated investment, coherent planning and faster decision-making. Misalignment generates duplication, delay and strategic friction.

It drives action. Strategy has already established the north as central to Australia's defence. NT Defence Week must convert that consensus into sequencing decisions, funding priorities and delivery timelines. Progress will be measured in infrastructure built, systems integrated and capability sustained under pressure.

The contributions in this compendium reflect that focus. They examine force posture, logistics, fuel security, infrastructure, estate reform, industrial development and alliance integration as components of a single operating system. They identify gaps and propose practical steps to close them.

Northern Australia doesn't need to become a fortress. It must become a resilient, scalable system capable of absorbing pressure and sustaining operations. That requires a phased, risk-based approach. Not every capability must move north. Every critical dependency must be understood, prioritised and strengthened.

Time compresses the problem. Warning times have shortened. Supply chains face persistent disruption. Strategic competition intensifies across military, economic and technological domains. Delay increases exposure. Incrementalism will not keep pace.

Australia now faces a clear choice.

Continue treating northern Australia as a series of projects and accept the growing strategic mismatch.

Or design and build an integrated operating system that converts geography into sustained operational power. The Northern Marine Complex, including the Darwin Ship Lift, demonstrates what that could look like in practice—but it remains in development and has yet to operate as part of a fully integrated system or receive the consistent demand required to scale.

When realised, it will enable maintenance, repair and recovery in Darwin. It will convert transit time into operational availability. It will strengthen national resilience, lift local industry capability and build a skilled workforce that endures beyond individual projects. It represents a critical component of the Northern Engine—but only if it is integrated with fuel, logistics, workforce and industrial systems across the north.

Australia must now move from demonstration to system-wide delivery.

Northern Australia already carries the strategic weight. The system required to sustain it remains unfinished.

Launch – force posture and northern basing

NT Defence Week 2026 puts spotlight on readiness

John Coyne

Image: Madhur Chitnis/Department of Defence.

The 13th Australian Defence Magazine Northern Australia Defence Summit will return as part of NT Defence Week 2026 on 28 April. That timing matters. The 2024 National Defence Strategy is explicit: Australia's strategy of denial will be executed across our northern maritime approaches. Northern Australia is the operational fulcrum. That conclusion has been repeated across successive defence documents.

Many are understandably fatigued by hearing how important the north is. The case for strategic geography has been made. But if we have not yet moved decisively from the 'why' to the 'how', then the conversation must continue, because implementation, not articulation, is now the critical variable.

This article, the first in a series leading into NT Defence Week 2026, starts from a simple premise: northern Australia is central. The issue is not conceptual alignment, but system-level execution.

The operational geometry is straightforward. The Darwin–Tindal–Katherine axis sits astride Australia's northern maritime approaches. From RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal, airpower can be generated within operationally meaningful distance of key sea lines of communication and archipelagic chokepoints. From Robertson Barracks and the Darwin littoral, the Australian Army's evolving littoral manoeuvre forces can disperse forward. From Darwin's port and sustainment ecosystem, maritime forces can operate with reduced transit time and increased persistence.

Geography here is structural.

A denial strategy depends on survivability, endurance and scalability. Northern bases and ranges must therefore function as an integrated, hardened and dispersed system. Extending runways and expanding accommodation are necessary but insufficient. System readiness requires fuel redundancy, protected logistics corridors, resilient data networks, water security, rapid repair capability and integrated air and missile defence.

The test is sustainment under stress.

If northern Australia is the centre of gravity, it must be capable of generating and sustaining high-intensity operations from the outset. That includes the fundamentals of combat generation. Yet practical constraints illustrate how much work remains. The ability to load certain classes of munitions at RAAF Base Darwin, for example, has historically been constrained. When a northern air base cannot seamlessly conduct the full spectrum of weapons loading required for high-tempo operations, posture does not equate to readiness.

This isn't about fault-finding; it's about recognising that system-level denial requires system-level enablers. If explosive ordnance infrastructure, storage certification or handling capacity lag behind aircraft basing, friction follows. In peacetime, friction is inconvenient. In a crisis, it's a risk.

The same principle applies across domains. Significant investments have flowed north: extended runways at Tindal, upgrades at Darwin, expanded fuel storage and deeper alliance integration through US Force Posture Initiatives. Marine Rotational Force – Darwin demonstrates combined commitment. But too often these remain discrete projects rather than components of a fully articulated northern operating system.

The army's optimisation for littoral manoeuvre provides a useful illustration. The Northern Territory offers proximity to the archipelagic arc, where denial would be contested, co-location with the US Marine Corps and shared training and pre-positioning potential. If the strategy is serious, Darwin must be treated as the primary basing, maintenance and logistics hub for that evolution.

But littoral manoeuvre isn't defined by landing craft alone. It requires hardened wharves, ammunition-handling facilities, fuel points, magazines, road and rail connectivity, and protected data networks. It requires the capacity to embark, sustain and rearm under pressure. That's a system, not a project.

Maritime sustainment follows the same logic. The Darwin Ship Lift and Marine Industry Park offer the opportunity to anchor sovereign maintenance capacity in the most relevant theatre. Regional Maintenance Centre – North can support Australian Defence Force, Border Force and allied vessels. Yet without predictable demand signals, workforce depth will remain fragile. Industry investment follows certainty.

Theatre logistics is the most underdeveloped determinant. A credible denial strategy requires stockpile depth, protected fuel storage, multimodal transport corridors and resilient energy systems. Ports must surge. Roads and rail must carry heavy loads at tempo. Data systems must remain operational under disruption. These are operational requirements, not development aspirations.

The purpose of the NT Defence Week 2026 isn't to restate geography; it's to interrogate readiness. What does 'networked and hardened' mean in measurable terms? How should projects be sequenced to deliver integrated capability rather than incremental upgrades? Where are the friction points that need urgent resolution?

If northern Australia is the centre of gravity for Australia's strategy of denial, as every strategic document asserts, then it must be built and funded as a connected operating system designed to absorb shock and sustain tempo. Moving from opportunity to implementation requires discipline, sequencing and clarity about outcomes.

The strategic geometry is settled. The question for NT Defence Week 2026 is whether our infrastructure, industry and sustainment settings are keeping pace.

Published on 19 February 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/nt-defence-week-2026-puts-spotlight-on-readiness/

Darwin is central to defence. It should be treated as such

John Coyne

Image: Ernesto Sanchez Jr/Department of Defence.

On 19 February 1942, Japanese aircraft attacked the harbour and town in what remains the largest single assault ever mounted on Australian soil. For much of Australia, it's a historical reference point. In Darwin, it's a lived inheritance, recalled in families, marked in ceremony and embedded in local identity.

That difference shapes how the Northern Territory understands defence.

Darwin sits closer to Jakarta than to Canberra. It's proximate to Southeast Asia's maritime chokepoints and to the Indo-Pacific's most dynamic economic and security corridors. For Territorians, distance isn't measured in political narratives but in nautical miles.

This perspective was reinforced in 1999 during the Australian-led multinational deployment to Timor-Leste. Darwin became the operational hub for Australia's largest regional military operation since Vietnam. The port, airport, local contractors, accommodation providers and emergency services weren't peripheral; they were integral to the mission. Darwin was not seen as too far, too hot or too expensive. The community experienced directly what it means to support and sustain deployed forces. And it did so with pride and commitment.

That experience created a practical understanding that defence posture isn't about only platforms and basing. It's about logistics, supply chains, workforce resilience and social licence. Darwin understands that the Australian Defence Force operates within a broader ecosystem, one that includes Territory industry, Indigenous landholders, infrastructure operators and local government.

Over the past decade, that understanding has deepened through the expansion of the US Force Posture Initiatives in Australia. The annual Marine Rotational Force – Darwin is now embedded in the Territory's operational rhythm and social fabric. Joint exercises, training area upgrades, and fuel and logistics enhancements are visible and tangible. The alliance isn't an abstraction; it's present.

At the same time, the strategic environment has become more complex. Great-power competition is shaping regional military modernisation, grey-zone activity and supply-chain security. The Northern Territory's role as a bridge to Southeast Asia and the Pacific sharpens its exposure to these dynamics. Territorians are acutely aware that infrastructure, ports, fuel storage and airfields aren't simply economic assets; they are strategic enablers.

This isn't to suggest that the Territory stands alone in Australia's defence architecture. Western Australia and South Australia will be central to AUKUS Pillar One. HMAS Stirling in Western Australia will host rotational British and US submarines; South Australia will anchor the construction and long-term sustainment of Australia's nuclear-powered submarine fleet. Those states will carry the industrial weight of AUKUS's most complex undertaking.

But the Northern Territory will be the forward edge of that relationship.

RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal, along with training areas such as Bradshaw and Delamere, underpin Australia's northern posture. They enable dispersal, rapid regeneration and sustained operations across the air-maritime interface. In any regional contingency, these facilities would shape response options. They are strategic and operational assets.

If Western Australia and South Australia represent the industrial heart of AUKUS Pillar One, the NT represents its operational frontage. The credibility of strike platforms and joint force integration ultimately rests on forward posture, logistics resilience and allied interoperability in the north.

Yet discussions about northern Australia are still disproportionately conducted in southern capitals. Strategy is drafted in Canberra. Commentary is generated in Sydney and Melbourne. The north appears as a line on a map rather than as a community and an economy that underwrites posture.

This isn't a complaint; it's an observation about alignment.

If northern Australia is central to deterrence and alliance credibility, then engagement with the Territory must be systematic and visible. That begins with recognising Darwin as more than a staging point.

There are practical steps to reinforce this approach.

First, every formal US defence visit to Australia should include a Darwin leg as standard practice. Engagement should extend beyond base inspections to include discussions with Territory industry, local government and community leaders. The alliance's most tangible expression is in the north; senior-level engagement should reflect that reality.

Second, US participation in NT Defence Week and similar forums should be proactive. These events aren't just promotional exercises. They're platforms to explain posture decisions, infrastructure investments and capability development in transparent terms. Clear communication builds public confidence and strengthens resilience.

Third, Defence and its US counterparts should deepen structured engagement with Territory industry. Hardening and upgrading northern bases, expanding fuel security and enhancing logistics networks require sustained collaboration with local firms. Early visibility of requirements enables industry to invest in skills and capacity.

Fourth, policymakers should integrate Darwin's historical experience into contemporary strategy. The anniversary of the 1942 bombing isn't ceremonial nostalgia. It's a reminder that northern communities have borne the direct consequences of conflict. Their strategic literacy is grounded in that experience.

None of this is about parochialism; it's about coherence. AUKUS Pillar One will depend on industrial strength in Western Australia and South Australia. It will also depend on credible forward posture in the north. The two are mutually reinforcing.

Published on 26 February 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/darwin-is-central-to-defence-it-should-be-treated-as-such/

This doesn't add up: as strategy looks north, Defence workforce shifts south

Raelene Lockhorst

Image: Gregory Scott/Department of Defence.

While Australia's defence strategy has moved north at speed, its permanent workforce has not.

The latest analysis product from ASPI's Northern Australia Policy Centre maps the distribution of regular Australian Defence Force members across Australia between 2015 and 2025. It shows that while total ADF personnel (permanent and reserves) grew nationally by 11,617 people or 13 percent, the Northern Territory moved in the opposite direction, with its permanent presence declining by around 12 percent over the same period. Strategy has shifted forward; the workforce map has not. (Figures in this article come from Department of Defence annual reports.)

Over the past decade, growth has been visible in Canberra as a command centre, in Western Australia as a maritime and industrial hub, in Queensland as a sustainment and training corridor and in Victoria as a logistics and advanced systems base. But in the Northern Territory, Australia's forward operating edge, permanent numbers have contracted.

In Darwin alone, permanent army postings fell from 3,124 in 2015 to around 2,557 in 2025. That decline is closely linked to structural changes, including relocation of the 1st Armoured Regiment to South Australia in 2017, and compounded by pressures related to Covid-19 and broader workforce constraints. Today, the territory's Defence workforce remains heavily army-weighted, with approximately 2,557 permanent army personnel and 743 reservists. The navy (around 604 permanent members) and the air force (around 1,018 permanent members) maintain smaller presences with limited reserve depth.

This divergence matters because strategy has fundamentally changed. Between 2015 and 2025, Australian defence policy shifted from long-horizon expansion to force optimisation, prioritising readiness, resilience, deterrence and integrated capability. Russia's invasion of Ukraine reintroduced high-intensity, attritional warfare as a live planning scenario. Instability in the

Middle East underscored maritime and energy vulnerabilities. Intensifying Indo-Pacific competition shortened warning times and increased the premium on forward posture, interoperability and sustained presence.

The north sits at the centre of this operating environment. The Northern Territory hosts Australia's most forward land forces. It underwrites major multinational exercises, such as Pitch Black, Talisman Sabre, Kakadu and Predator's Run. It routinely absorbs short-duration surges ranging from roughly 700 to more than 4,000 personnel per activity. It supports coalition engagement with more than 30 nations. The US Marine Rotational Force–Darwin adds around 2,500 US Marines on six-month rotations each year. But this is a surge layered onto a thinner permanent base.

In effect, Australia has increased the strategic weight carried by each Defence member in the Northern Territory without increasing the number of members. National Defence workforce growth has followed function rather than geography. That reflects rational decisions shaped by sunk capital costs, as bases, housing, logistics systems and industrial ecosystems can't be relocated lightly. Efficiency has encouraged concentration of complex systems, headquarters functions and advanced industrial capability in established southern and western hubs.

But in an era of compressed warning times and distributed operations, efficiency must be balanced with effectiveness. A force structured primarily around peacetime cost efficiency may struggle to scale under pressure if workforce mass and enabling functions aren't embedded in the theatre most likely to generate sustained operations. Rotational presence demonstrates commitment, but it doesn't substitute for structural depth.

A tendency for Defence people to quit after assignment to northern Australia is often cited as a constraint on expanding the permanent force there. But that only means Defence must do something to overcome the problem, not avoid it. Northern Australia's climatic conditions are hardly unique. More than 680 million people live in Southeast Asia in comparable tropical environments.

Weather is not the binding constraint. Rather, the main problems are several that governments can control: housing availability, schooling, spousal employment pathways, posting cycles, incentives and career progression.

The need to build strength in the north goes beyond uniformed numbers. Australia is seeking a more distributed and scalable defence industrial base, including across northern Australia. A distributed defence industry demands a distributed skilled workforce, logistics specialists, engineers, technicians, planners and reservists close to bases from which operations would be launched.

Industry would have to scale up in a crisis, too. It can't unless a sufficient uniformed workforce is already there to support the expansion.

The past decade has shown that Australia can grow its defence workforce. The data in this new analysis makes clear that growth has not been evenly aligned with strategic geography. If the Northern Territory is to remain Australia's forward operating edge and carry increasing strategic weight, then workforce settings must evolve accordingly. Targeted, enduring growth in enabling functions in the north would strengthen readiness without requiring indiscriminate relocation elsewhere.

Strategic weight without workforce depth is a risk. With shortened warning times and rising operational demands, the location of people is as consequential as their numbers. The numbers over the past 10 years are clear. The question for policymakers is whether the next decade will finally align the workforce map with Australian strategy.

Published on 13 February 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/this-doesnt-add-up-as-strategy-looks-north-defence-workforce-shifts-south/

Beyond the Brisbane Line: northern posture strengthens Australia's defence

John Coyne

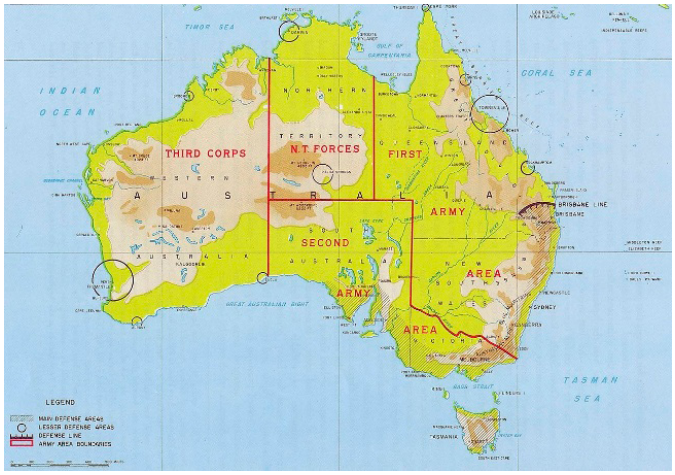

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Australia needs an integrated approach that strengthens cyber and space capabilities and builds a resilient, dispersed posture in the north. This would ensure that in any future scenario the first operational leap projects outward.

Northern Australia features prominently in the National Defence Strategy. Yet, signs persist of an unofficial cultural return to the 'Brisbane Line': uneven force posture in the north; limited permanently based capability relative to ambition; and recurring claims that Darwin's exposure makes it strategically imprudent. Some argue that because Darwin lies within striking range of potential adversaries, Australia should concentrate forces in the south or defend the nation from its southern capitals.

Yet Australia no longer enjoys sanctuary through remoteness. Cyber and space shape contemporary competition, and demand sustained investment, sovereign capability and alliance integration.

Long-range conventional strike systems extend deep into the Indo-Pacific. Cyber operators reach Australian networks irrespective of geography. Space-based intelligence systems observe activity across the continent. Economic coercion operates through trade and supply chains. Together, these trends collapse the notion that southern distance guarantees safety.

In that context, range no longer determines security; survivability and operational design do.

Northern Australia sits at the centre of that design. Darwin and the wider north provide proximity to the primary theatre of strategic competition. Distance, logistics and tempo still shape outcomes. Proximity generates options: aircraft deploy faster; maritime forces sustain a presence more efficiently; logistics chains shorten; training occurs in relevant environments.

Forward posture strengthens deterrence by denial by demonstrating the capacity to operate in contested conditions rather than merely threatening retaliation from afar.

The Australian Defence Force can ill afford to treat the first leap of power projection or littoral manoeuvre as an internal relocation to Darwin. Movement north must form part of the outward operational design from the outset. If planners treat Darwin as a rear staging point rather than as an integrated, distributed platform oriented toward Australia's north, force design risks rehearsing mobilisation within Australia rather than preparing for contested operations beyond it. The first leap must extend outward into the theatre, not simply northward across the continent.

Critics argue that forward posture invites vulnerability. Vulnerability stems from concentration and fragility, not proximity alone. Effective posture design rejects centralised mass and builds dispersal, hardened infrastructure, fuel resilience, rapid repair capacity and redundancy across multiple northern locations. Shorter lines of communication improve sustainment tempo and enable faster regeneration under pressure. A distributed northern network complicates targeting, reduces the prospect of a disabling first strike and strengthens deterrence by denial by signalling that no single blow can decisively degrade Australia's operational capacity.

Retreating south would not remove Australia from kinetic, cyber or economic reach. It would lengthen timelines, strain logistics and signal hesitancy. Distance no longer protects; design does.

Multi-domain operations demand integration, not competition. Air, maritime, land, cyber and space capabilities must reinforce one another within a coherent system. Northern infrastructure enables manoeuvre and sustainment. Cyber imposes costs and protects networks. Space provides awareness and connectivity. Integrated posture raises the threshold for coercion and strengthens stability through credible denial.

The United States recognises that logic. Rotational presence, infrastructure investment and expanded cooperation in the Northern Territory form part of a broader distributed posture across the Indo-Pacific. US planners value proximity to Southeast Asian sea lanes, expansive training ranges and the strategic depth Australia offers outside the first island chain. US commitment reflects hard strategic calculation.

Australian policy should match that clarity. A northern posture strengthens sovereignty by enhancing self-reliance and interoperability with allies. It embeds Australia within a resilient defence architecture that absorbs pressure rather than avoids it.

Northern Australia also offers industrial opportunities aligned with operational needs. Investment in transport, energy and logistics strengthens both military and civilian resilience. Defence industry in the north should focus on sustainment, fuel security, maintenance and capabilities matched to geography rather than replicate southern manufacturing bases.

Australia should use the 2026 NT Defence Week to sharpen strategic thinking about defence in the north and clarify the ADF's plans. Policymakers, industry and allies should articulate how posture, infrastructure and alliance integration align with operational design. Clear articulation strengthens deterrence and aligns investment with purpose.

Australia does not face a choice between Darwin and cyber, between northern posture and space capability, or between resilience and innovation. An effective strategy integrates them. Sanctuary has eroded. Survivability now depends on layered resilience, credible presence and outward-oriented operational design.

Northern Australia remains central to that task, not as the sole repository of defence capability, but as a strategic platform within a national, multi-domain architecture built for deterrence and stability.

Published on 11 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/beyond-the-brisbane-line-northern-posture-strengthens-australias-defence/

Sustain – logistics, fuel and supply chains

Hormuz closure brings Australia's layered fuel vulnerability to the fore

Raelene Lockhorst

Recent events in the Middle East have turned the fuel vulnerability Australia confronted during the Red Sea disruptions last year into an immediate strategic test.

Following US and Israeli strikes on Iran, Tehran has claimed that the Strait of Hormuz is closed and warned that ships attempting to transit the waterway risk attack. The narrow channel between Iran and Oman normally carries around one fifth of global oil and gas supply, making it one of the most important energy chokepoints in the world.

For most countries, disruption there means higher prices. For Australia, it raises a more uncomfortable question: how resilient is the supply chain that delivers fuel to the continent?

Australia exports vast quantities of energy but remains structurally dependent on imported liquid fuels. More than 90 percent of refined petroleum products consumed domestically are imported, largely from Asian refineries that themselves rely heavily on Middle Eastern crude.

That means a crisis in the Persian Gulf does not simply affect Australia indirectly through global markets; it also affects the refineries—particularly in Singapore, South Korea and Japan—that produce the petrol, diesel and jet fuel that Australia imports. In other words, the vulnerability sits two steps upstream in the supply chain.

With Hormuz now effectively closed to commercial traffic, Asian refiners face tightening crude supply and shipping disruption. The immediate consequence will be price volatility. The strategic consequence is something more serious: a shrinking buffer between normal supply and disruption.

Australia's fuel vulnerability is often discussed in terms of global supply. But geography suggests a more uncomfortable reality: even if Middle Eastern crude can eventually be rerouted or sourced elsewhere, the refined fuel Australia imports must still pass through the narrow maritime channels of Southeast Asia before reaching Australian ports.

These Indonesian straits (Malacca, Lombok and Sunda) carry the majority of Australia's trade, with roughly 83 percent of maritime imports and around 90 percent of exports moving through these routes. In other words, the closure of Hormuz is only the first layer of vulnerability.

The second lies much closer to home.

Imagine a scenario in which disruption in the Middle East constrains crude supply to Asian refineries while, at the same time, maritime disruption, coercion or conflict closes the Sunda Strait or other Indonesian passages. The result would not simply be expensive fuel; it would be physically constrained access to refined products. Australia would suddenly be competing for limited supplies delivered along longer and more contested routes.

The strategic question becomes unavoidable: how quickly could Australia move fuel internally if imports slowed or stalled? This is where northern Australia enters the discussion—not as a victim of fuel insecurity, but potentially as part of the solution.

Australia's northern ports sit closer to Southeast Asian refining hubs than southern capitals. Darwin lies less than four days' sailing from Singapore. In a crisis, geography alone makes northern Australia the most logical entry point for emergency fuel shipments and redistribution across the continent.

Yet northern Australia remains the least developed part of Australia's liquid fuel logistics network. Storage capacity is limited, domestic refining has largely disappeared and the fuel infrastructure that does exist is largely designed for local consumption rather than national contingency. This matters for defence as much as for the economy.

Northern Australia hosts key training ranges, airbases and rotational deployments for Australian and allied forces. It is increasingly central to Australia's deterrence posture. But a northern force posture without assured fuel supply chains risks becoming strategically brittle.

Fuel is the quiet enabler of deterrence. Without it, runways, ports and logistics hubs become stranded infrastructure.

Australia has taken steps in recent years to rebuild strategic fuel reserves and increase storage capacity, including establishing offshore reserves and expanding domestic stockholding obligations. These initiatives are important, but they remain largely designed around compliance with international energy obligations and short-term supply shocks.

The emerging strategic environment suggests a different requirement. Rather than treating fuel security purely as a stockpiling problem, Australia should think about distributed fuel resilience. That includes larger northern storage facilities, greater redundancy in import terminals and expanded capacity to move fuel across the continent during disruption. It also means accelerating diversification through alternative fuels, synthetic fuels and defence-grade energy systems that reduce reliance on imported petroleum over time. Such investments would strengthen both economic resilience and military readiness.

The lesson from the current crisis is not simply that Hormuz matters; it is that Australia's fuel security depends on a chain of maritime chokepoints stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Indonesian archipelago. Disruption at any point along that chain reduces Australia's margin for error. Hormuz has become the first link in that

chain to break. If disruption were to extend into Southeast Asian sea lanes, Australia would face a strategic test that no amount of last-minute fuel rationing could easily solve.

Facing that possibility, the centre of gravity in Australia's fuel-security debate must shift north, because the geography of resilience increasingly runs through northern Australia.

Published on 10 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hormuz-closure-brings-australias-layered-fuel-vulnerability-to-the-fore/

Australia's fuel shock reveals a system without a centre

Raelene Lockhorst

Image: Sheila C/Unsplash.

Australia's fuel crisis has triggered a familiar response: emergency coordination, reactive policy adjustments and renewed political attention. But the important question is why Australia still responds this way at all.

This week, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese convened National Cabinet and announced the establishment of a fuel supply taskforce within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, describing the approach as ensuring Australia is 'over-prepared' for potential disruption.

The need for coordinated national fuel governance is not new. *Australia's Liquid Fuel Security,* a 2013 report prepared by John Blackburn for NRMA Motoring and Services, identified the core problem. It warned that Australia's growing dependence on imported refined fuels, declining domestic refining capacity and exposure to global supply chains created a structural vulnerability. More importantly, it argued that fuel security was not just a supply issue; it was a coordination problem. Australia lacked a central authority to manage allocation, prioritisation and distribution in times of disruption.

By 2023, the Defence Strategic Review reframed fuel as a critical national security vulnerability and pointed to the need for stronger whole-of-government coordination. Central to that discussion was the establishment of a national coordinating mechanism—widely understood as a National Fuel Council—bringing together Defence, energy, industry and logistics stakeholders.

Open-source information indicates that such a body was established in 2023. Defence material confirms that the council held its inaugural meeting in August that year, followed by a second meeting in October. Subsequent parliamentary references suggest that the council continues to operate under joint leadership from Defence and climate portfolios.

This should have addressed the coordination gap identified in Blackburn's report and the Defence Strategic Review. Yet that coordination is not visible.

Instead, the government has moved to establish a new fuel supply taskforce to act as a central convening point, noting that measures have already been implemented including releasing 20 percent of reserves to address regional shortages, temporarily amending fuel standards to retain Australian-produced fuel onshore, and intervening on price gouging. The taskforce will provide ongoing updates on supply outlook and coordinate international engagement to secure fuel flows.

These are logical steps. In the absence of a visible coordination framework, escalation to National Cabinet and the creation of a central taskforce is inevitable.

But it also raises a more fundamental question about the existing system.

Responsibility for fuel security formally sits with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. The existence of a National Fuel Council suggests that a coordinating mechanism already operates at the senior level. Yet in practice, the current response has required the creation of a new structure within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to perform that coordination function in real time.

This points to a structural disconnect.

The government's framing of being 'over-prepared' reflects an intention to get ahead of potential disruption. But the need to stand up a taskforce during a crisis suggests that Australia is not operating from a pre-established, transparent coordination framework. Instead, it is building one in response to unfolding events.

Despite sufficient aggregate supply, localised shortages have emerged, particularly in regional Australia, where diesel disruptions are affecting agriculture, freight and mining. Governments are intervening to redirect flows and stabilise the system—but these decisions are being made in real time rather than guided by a national framework.

Australia has seen these dynamics before. During the Covid-19 pandemic, global supply-chain disruptions exposed how quickly fuel systems could come under pressure. That should have catalysed structural reform. Instead, policy responses have focused on supply buffers, including stockholding obligations and refinery support, rather than on how fuel is governed under stress.

The National Fuel Council was intended to fill that gap. But its role remains opaque. There is no public mandate, no published membership and no clear articulation of how it operates during a crisis. Its existence is acknowledged, but its function is not visible.

The creation of the fuel supply taskforce is therefore both necessary and revealing. It is a logical step, but one that appears to have come late. More importantly, it does not resolve the underlying issue of how national fuel coordination will operate beyond the immediate crisis.

Fuel security is not just about how much supply Australia holds; it is about how that supply is prioritised, allocated and distributed when the system is under stress. That requires clear authority, defined processes and transparency across government and industry. It requires coordination mechanisms that are visible and operational before a crisis, not constructed during one.

The Defence Strategic Review made clear that Australia's strategic environment would be characterised by contested supply chains and increasing disruption risk. Fuel sits at the centre of that system, underpinning military operations, economic activity and societal functioning. If coordination mechanisms are not embedded and understood in advance, they will not function effectively when tested.

Blackburn's 2013 NRMA report, the Covid-19 shock and the 2023 Defence Strategic Review each pointed to the same conclusion: fuel vulnerability is a coordination problem as much as a supply problem. The current crisis confirms that lesson.

The government has now taken steps to centralise coordination through the fuel supply taskforce. The question moving forward is whether this becomes the foundation of a transparent and enduring national framework, or whether it remains a temporary response layered over an opaque system.

Published on 20 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-fuel-shock-reveals-a-system-without-a-centre/

If fuel runs short, governments must triage. After medical services, the economy comes first

John Coyne

Image: Joanne Leca/Department of Defence.

Fuel crises expose a hard truth: systems fail when governments ration for comfort instead of economic capability.

Australia faces that test as disruption in the Strait of Hormuz constrains global energy flows and highlights a structural vulnerability: heavy reliance on imports and limited domestic fuel reserves. The policy response must shift from apparent fairness to triage.

Under normal conditions, markets are the most efficient mechanism for allocating resources. They aggregate information, signal scarcity through price and reward efficiency. But crisis conditions aren't normal. Severe supply shocks break core market assumptions. Prices rise, yet price signals fail to distinguish between uses that sustain national capability and those that merely reflect willingness to pay. Markets allocate efficiently, not strategically.

Scarcity changes the objective of policy. Equal distribution may appear fair, but it can destroy more economic capability than it preserves. Outcome-based allocation starts from a harder premise: not all demand is equal. Some uses of fuel preserve future economic output, while others sustain present convenience. Under constraint, governments must prioritise the former.

Economic theory supports this approach. The input-output framework of economist Wassily Leontief demonstrated that economies function through dense interdependencies, in which outputs from one sector become inputs to another. Another economist, Albert Hirschman, extended this logic, arguing that scarce resources should be directed toward sectors with the strongest linkages, where pressure generates disproportionate system-wide effects. In the context of fuel crises, this means prioritising activities that keep the broader system functioning.

Recent experience reinforces the point. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments prioritised essential services and critical workers to preserve continuity. Discretionary activity wasn't treated equally with health care, freight and food distribution. Unequal allocation was necessary because system function mattered more than symmetry.

Fuel shortages demand even sharper discipline. Diesel underpins freight, agriculture, mining, backup-generation and emergency services. Australia's limited reserves and recent regulatory interventions, such as reduced stockholding requirements and coordinated supply chain measures, reflect mounting pressure. Market mechanisms alone cannot guarantee orderly distribution under these conditions. The deeper vulnerability lies not just in supply volumes but in fragile parts of distribution: regional nodes, small carriers and credit-constrained operators that sit upstream of visible shortages and fail first under stress.

Uniform rationing would fail. A proportional cut across all users may seem simple, but it inflicts disproportionate harm. Reducing discretionary driving delays trips. Reducing diesel for planting, harvesting, or freight can reduce output, triggering cascading effects across the food supply, exports, and inflation.

Outcome-based allocation requires explicit prioritisation. Four categories should sit at the top of the queue.

— First, life-support and emergency functions: hospitals, emergency services and essential utilities.

— Second, system-enabling logistics: freight networks, ports, rail and distribution systems that move goods.

— Third, productive capacity preservation: agriculture during key seasonal windows, mining operations that sustain export flows, and backup generation for critical infrastructure.

— Fourth, regional and remote continuity, where fuel shortages can isolate communities from essential services.

Lower-value and discretionary uses should compete for the remaining supply.

This hierarchy challenges the idea that every litre carries equal social value. It doesn't. Fuel used in harvesting can preserve months of downstream production. An equal quantity of fuel used for discretionary travel cannot. Activities with stronger system linkages must take priority when resources are constrained. In practice, this means governments must be prepared to make granular, time-sensitive decisions rather than rely on blunt policy instruments that spread scarcity evenly but ineffectively.

Modern crises no longer occur in isolation. They arrive continuously, concurrently and with cascading effects. COVID-19 demonstrated how disruption spreads across tightly coupled systems. Current fuel shocks are doing the same, constraining energy flows and amplifying costs across sectors. Individual shocks may pass, but the pattern of systemic stress persists. Delays in decision-making magnify impacts, compress response windows and increase the likelihood of cascading system failure.

All this demands a shift in mindset. Markets should remain the default, and intervention the exception. But under acute stress, governments must act, not to replace markets but to correct their limitations. Markets cannot prioritise resilience or national capability. Governments must.

That requires political clarity and courage. Leaders must explain why some sectors receive priority, why production outweighs convenience and why unequal allocation is sometimes necessary. Public trust will depend not on promises of fairness, but on clarity of purpose.

Countries that allocate strategically under constraint will preserve economic capability. Those that default to superficially perceived fairness or retreat behind market purity risk discovering too late that efficient allocation is not the same as effective survival.

Published on 1 April 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/if-fuel-runs-short-governments-must-triage-after-medical-services-the-economy-comes-first

Build – estate, infrastructure and industry

Northern Australia needs resilient, networked infrastructure

John Coyne

Image: Michael Currie/Department of Defence.

Concrete and ribbon-cutting events don't sustain wars; fuel, power, logistics and people do. Australia has invested significantly in northern basing and alliance posture, yet our strategic debate still leans toward visible infrastructure rather than the systems that keep it operating under stress.

The next National Defence Strategy should address that shortfall by clearly defining what a genuinely networked and hardened northern posture entails and by setting out an evolutionary plan to build resilience to sustain.

The upgrades to RAAF Base Tindal, the expansion of Robertson Barracks and the continued development of the United States Force Posture Initiatives are strategically significant. They anchor Australia's northern footprint and deepen integration with partners. They represent deliberate investment in geography.

But geography alone doesn't generate operational depth.

The more demanding question is whether northern Australia can sustain prolonged, multi-domain operations under conditions of supply-chain disruption, persistent cyber intrusion and intensifying climate stress. Can it continue operating if shipping lanes are contested or ports degrade? Can it absorb sustained pressure on energy systems? Can it scale maintenance, logistics and industrial support beyond peacetime settings?

These are system-level questions, not construction metrics.

A hardened northern posture must connect runway upgrades at Tindal to protected transport networks and assured, distributed fuel storage. It must link the growth of Robertson Barracks and US Marine rotations in Darwin to port throughput capacity and inland freight corridors capable of reliably and quickly moving heavy sustainment loads. It must integrate grid resilience, water security and digital infrastructure protection into defence planning rather than treating them as adjacent policy domains.

Modern logistics are digitally enabled. Port scheduling platforms, fuel dispatch systems and inventory networks are high-value cyber targets. A base that's physically hardened but digitally exposed is brittle in a different domain.

The next National Defence Strategy should therefore articulate what 'networked and hardened' means in practical terms. Not simply dispersed basing, but integrated fuel security. Not just munitions storage, but resilient ports and scalable inland freight. Not merely visiting forces, but sustainment ecosystems capable of operating through disruption.

One way to embed this thinking would be to develop a resilience index for northern logistics nodes—an integrated, risk-based assessment of energy redundancy, fuel depth, cyber robustness, transport scalability, workforce capacity and climate adaptation. The aim would be to identify single points of failure and prioritise investment where cascading risks are most acute.

Whether responding to a severe natural disaster or a major conflict, mobilisation depends on pre-existing industrial depth. Australia's economic model has delivered efficiency through lean supply chains and metropolitan concentration. That efficiency, however, can produce fragility. In a short, sharp crisis, the strain may be absorbed. In a prolonged scenario where energy markets are volatile, cyberattacks are persistent, and supply chains are disrupted, the lack of a scalable northern industry would become apparent quickly.

There is a lingering belief that, in extremis, the federal government could take control and retool northern industry. That assumption deserves a reality check. Industrial mobilisation requires skilled workforces, trusted commercial relationships, regulatory clarity, and existing infrastructure capacity. It depends on energy systems that can handle increased load. It depends on freight networks that are operating with headroom. It depends on businesses with the confidence to invest in dual-use capability.

If those foundations are absent before a crisis strikes, emergency authorities won't create them overnight.

This doesn't make resilience solely Defence's responsibility. Northern Australia's economic diversification, energy transition and infrastructure development are national priorities that involve multiple portfolios and levels of government. Defence planning also shouldn't dictate every economic decision in the north.

But Defence has a distinctive contribution to make. It understands operational requirements across time horizons. It conducts scenario planning and stress testing. It thinks in terms of redundancy and endurance. It has the strategy and policy capabilities to work across government, energy, infrastructure, industry and finance,

and to articulate why certain investments aren't simply economic choices but enablers of national resilience.

The next National Defence Strategy should therefore do two things clearly.

First, it should highlight the interdependencies between the defence posture and critical infrastructure in Northern Australia. Fuel storage, port capacity, grid resilience, inland transport corridors and digital security are not peripheral enablers.

Second, it should embrace an evolutionary approach. We're not seeking a fortress north, nor duplicating every metropolitan capability above the Tropic of Capricorn. That would be economically unrealistic and strategically unnecessary. What's required is a phased, risk-based effort that incrementally strengthens resilience over time, aligning Defence planning with infrastructure investment and industry development.

Such alignment would deliver broader benefits. Strengthened energy systems enhance disaster response. Improved freight corridors support critical minerals processing and continuity of liquefied natural gas. Workforce development tied to sustainment requirements builds regional opportunity and investor confidence.

In northern Australia, defence resilience, national security and economic security are not competing agendas. Properly integrated, they reinforce one another.

The north is not simply a location for exercises and rotations. It is the sustainment spine of Australia's forward posture. The next National Defence Strategy has the opportunity to define that spine more clearly and explain how it will be strengthened in practical, measurable ways.

Published on 2 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/northern-australia-needs-resilient-networked-infrastructure/

Jointly rebuilding the Australian-US defence industrial base

Morgan Bazilian and Jahara Matisek

Image: Shaun Chatfield/Department of Defence.

The United States' 2026 National Defense Strategy may give Australia the impetus for accelerating its shift towards industrial sovereignty and deeper strategic economic integration with the US. But this requires more than policy alignment; it demands a concrete industrial blueprint for converting Australia's geographic and geological advantages into tangible, shared industrial power.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy establishes the allied defence industrial base as a central pillar of deterrence. The strategy specifically calls for supercharging US and allied industrial capacity as it redefines alliance contributions, emphasising the ability to produce and sustain military power.

This need to achieve a resilient and capable defence industrial base for Australia and the US has been made clear by the Russo-Ukrainian war. The US Army's surge-production effort for 155 mm artillery shells revealed severe industrial constraints. Despite aiming for 100,000 rounds per month and a US$6 billion investment, production has only reached 60,000 due to casing and propellant bottlenecks.

Australia is no better off. As ASPI's report *The Cost of Defence 2025–26* showed, there is 'not enough money, skills or organisation' for a defence build-up.

In Washington, defence industrial strategy increasingly frames supply chains as frontline national security vulnerabilities. The emphasis on onshoring, near-shoring and ally-shoring reflects growing concern about adversarial leverage, given China's willingness since 2023 to impose export restrictions on various magnets, materials, minerals and rare earths.

The Pentagon depends on a global network of over 200,000 suppliers, with persistent foreign dependence across electronics, explosives, rocket and artillery propellant, and advanced materials. Meanwhile, US defence production remains highly concentrated with the five biggest prime contractors, while decades of cost-cutting efficiency has hollowed out surge capacity, workforce depth and responsiveness for sub-tier firms.

Australia is positioned to benefit, especially with the AUKUS partnership providing a blueprint for deeper defence integration. Australian inclusion in the National Technology and Industrial Base places it among the countries considered integral to US industrial resilience. However, without deliberate frameworks, Australia risks being an auxiliary node when it should be a major, structural pillar. Amid American struggles to produce artillery and missiles, allied industrial geography, if properly integrated, can reduce systemic risk rather than simply redistribute it.

The 2025 US–Australia critical minerals framework offers a useful framework. Backed by US$3 billion in combined public financing, the agreement is designed to unlock an US$8.5 billion pipeline of mining and manufacturing projects across Australia. If the agreement keeps Australia as a raw material exporter, it will only marginally diversify US supply chains while leaving Australia exposed to commodity cycles. If Australia uses the deal to anchor downstream processing, alloying and magnet manufacturing, it can convert this into enduring industrial power and support economic vibrancy.

For Australia, moving from miner to manufacturer would directly support domestic capability, including advanced AUKUS Pillar 2 technologies, and embed Australian firms into US production networks, deepening strategic interdependence.

Industrial geography matters as much as industrial policy.

Northern Australia has long been viewed through a military lens, hosting rotational forces in Darwin. But deterrence and success in an Indo-Pacific conflict will depend on sustainment. Recent investments in northern infrastructure, spanning air bases and maritime facilities, already reflect this logic. What remains underdeveloped is the industrial layer. Co-located manufacturing, maintenance and logistics hubs near Darwin, Townsville or Cairns could support rapid sustainment of munitions, disperse industrial capability to complicate adversary targeting, and reduce transit times for supporting allied forces. Facilities such as Middle Arm in Darwin or port infrastructure in North Queensland offer platforms for industry that complement southern manufacturing centres. Treating these as national infrastructure reframes industrial capacity as a pillar of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Moving beyond ad hoc cooperation requires Canberra and Washington to treat alliance industrial capacity as a national security imperative that justifies overriding bureaucratic friction. Leaders in both capitals should jointly map capability needs, harmonise standards to reduce cross-border production friction, and expand workforce exchanges to address shared skills shortages. AUKUS export-control reforms show what is possible when priorities are aligned, but implementation is uneven.

Success will be measured in jointly produced munitions, processed Australian rare earths, and a resilient northern sustainment network ready for a major crisis.

Published on 11 February 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/jointly-rebuilding-the-australian-us-defence-industrial-base/

Defence sites for disposal after Australia audits military land holdings

Raelene Lockhorst

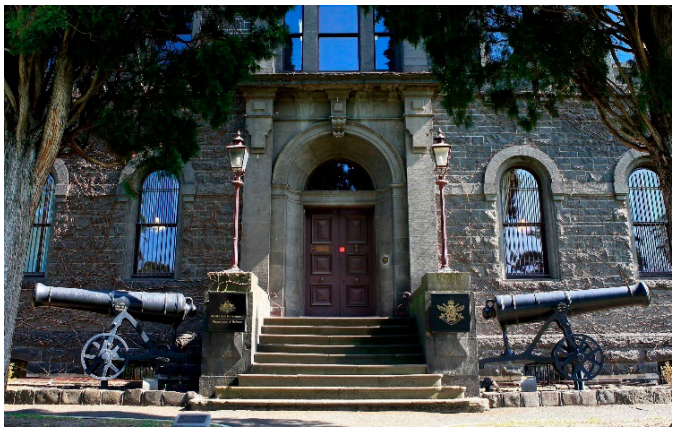

Image: Dove Smithett/Department of Defence.

An audit of Australia's military landholdings and the government's response to it, both issued on 4 February, mark the most significant reform of the assets in decades.

Long expected, the audit lands at a critical moment, as the Defence establishment confronts rising strategic risk, constrained workforce growth and mounting pressures on sustaining military capability. The findings of and response to the audit, *Delivering the Future Estate*, are therefore not simply about property management; they go directly to force posture, readiness and resilience.

The audit's organising principle is clear: if a site does not deliver a demonstrable capability benefit, it should not remain on the Defence balance sheet.

Importantly, Defence and the Department of Finance have said all divestment proceeds and sustainability savings will be spent within Defence—across capability, on other properties, and equipment.

At its core, the audit presents an opportunity to sharpen Australia's force posture by rationalising land holdings and redirecting spending towards modern, resilient and operationally relevant infrastructure. Proposed disposal of metropolitan rifle ranges, ageing training depots, surplus warehousing and old administrative sites could free resources for enabling infrastructure in northern Australia, deeper logistics capacity and sustainment systems aligned with Australia's strategic geography.

But this transition must be carefully managed. Many of these sites quietly underpin Reserve force training, readiness and workforce retention, particularly in metropolitan areas where relocation is not feasible. Without deliberate replacement or alternative access arrangements, estate reform risks weakening the Reserve component that provides the Australian Defence Force with essential mobilisation depth, domestic response capacity and surge resilience. The strategic task is therefore not simply to reduce footprint but to ensure that estate reform enhances overall

force readiness while preserving the Reserves as a credible and accessible pillar of Australia's force posture.

The audit was commissioned in the wake of the 2023 Defence Strategic Review to answer a seemingly simple but deceptively complex question: does Australia's defence estate actually support the force we need to mobilise and sustain? That question matters because the estate is not a background administrative function. Bases, training areas, ports, airfields, warehouses and fuel infrastructure are what translate strategy into operational reality. If they are misaligned, poorly located or prematurely divested, no amount of investment in platforms or weapons systems will compensate.

For too long, defence estate policy has sat awkwardly between strategy and budget repair, with emotion and nostalgia lurking in the background. Successive governments have treated property holdings as a source of potential savings rather than as an integrated component of force posture. The result has been chronic underinvestment, opaque divestment processes and a persistent gap between strategic intent and the infrastructure required to deliver it. The audit was meant to test whether the size, location and condition of the estate aligned with Australia's evolving strategic circumstances—particularly a more contested Indo-Pacific, longer supply lines and increased reliance on northern and western operating bases. It also sought to challenge optimistic assumptions about divestment proceeds, which have often been overstated, delayed or absorbed by remediation and relocation costs.

The timing of the audit's release is significant, coming ahead of the 2026 National Defence Strategy, as Defence juggles accelerating capability programs with workforce constraints and rising sustainment demands. In this environment, the estate can no longer be treated as a passive asset pool. Decisions about consolidation or disposal will directly shape readiness, resilience and retention. There is also a transparency imperative. In recent budgets, estate divestment proceeds have been bundled with unrelated asset sales, obscuring what Defence is realising from property transactions and whether those proceeds are genuinely funding capability uplift or masking structural funding gaps.

The audit's findings cut through several long-running assumptions. It identifies about $3 billion in gross divestment proceeds, offset by around $1.2 billion in relocation, remediation, due diligence and transition costs, yielding an estimated net return of $1.8 billion. It also dispels expectations of a wholesale south-to-north redistribution of ADF personnel. While the strategic importance of northern Australia is reaffirmed, the audit does not point to large-scale geographic workforce rebalancing through estate reform alone.

A central driver of reform is sustainment inefficiency. Defence currently spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually maintaining sites affected by degradation, security risks and, occasionally, unauthorised occupation. Defence estimates potential long-term sustainment savings of up to $2 billion annually, with more conservative near-term savings of around $100 million per year and avoided capital expenditure of approximately $300 million.

Underutilisation is another theme. Modern Defence office accommodation in Sydney and Melbourne is operating at roughly 45 percent utilisation, while old sites continue to carry high maintenance burdens. This mismatch underpins recommendations to consolidate personnel into existing modern facilities rather than retaining underused heritage buildings as office space. Heritage itself emerges as a sensitive but unavoidable issue. Many sites are historically significant, yet public access is often limited and the cost of preservation is borne disproportionately by Defence. This issue is particularly evident in the treatment of the Victoria Barracks in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

In total, the audit makes 68 recommendations, recommends retaining 67 sites in full, notes three already sold, and identifies 61 new sites for disposal. Most are small, dispersed, underused or vacant—confirming longstanding concerns about estate sprawl rather than strategic concentration.

However, the audit also identifies major sites for disposal, including Victoria Barracks (Sydney), Victoria Barracks (Melbourne), HMAS Penguin (Sydney), RAAF Glenbrook (west of Sydney), Spectacle Island (Sydney) and Woodside Barracks (east of Adelaide). Partial divestment is recommended at several locations, including Randwick Barracks (Sydney) and selected training depots, raising legitimate questions about how operational capability and Reserve forces will be preserved.

Implications for the Army Reserve footprint are particularly significant. Sites such as Lancer, Hampstead, Warradale and Derwent barracks and RAAF Williams, Point Cook and Laverton are flagged for change. Maintaining numerous small, ageing and intermittently used facilities can divert resources away from training, equipment and readiness—the very elements that determine whether Reserve forces can be mobilised at speed. Partial divestment seeks to preserve core functions while shedding surplus land, but the risk lies in execution. If divestment outpaces replacement or consolidation, Reserve capability could be weakened through reduced accessibility and local engagement.

What matters now is implementation. Over the next two years, identified sites will transfer to Finance for disposal. That handover must be treated as a continuation of the existing audit and assurance process. Finance, as the federal government's specialist asset manager, is well placed to maximise value, but only if Defence's due diligence, environmental assessments, heritage reviews and stakeholder consultations are accepted and carried forward without duplication.

The defence estate is not surplus to strategy. It is strategy, poured into concrete, steel and geography. This audit was much needed. The test will be whether Australia's defence footprint can be aligned with the strategic weight we now ask it to carry.

Published on 4 February 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/defence-sites-for-disposal-after-australia-audits-military-land-holdings/

Without clarity, Defence Estate Audit tests Australia's trust

Raelene Lockhorst

Image: Jason Boyes/Wikimedia Commons.

Last week's parliamentary committee hearings confirmed the need for, and the risks of, the Defence Estate Audit. The audit was meant to improve infrastructure efficiency. Instead, it has exposed a deeper strategic problem: Australians are no longer confident they understand what Defence is preparing for and why.

In the fortnight following the audit's release—notwithstanding outcry from the Returned and Services League, veteran groups, and environmental and heritage organisations—there has been extensive media coverage scrutinising the reforms. Much of this has converged on a politically potent, even if inaccurate, interpretation that Defence is selling assets simply to balance its books.

The reaction matters because it signals a failure of strategic narrative rather than policy intent. Few dispute that parts of Defence's vast property portfolio are outdated, underutilised or misaligned with future capability needs. But instead of being understood as preparation for a more lethal and resilient force, the audit has instead triggered a legitimacy debate shaped by heritage concerns, housing pressures and growing public scepticism about defence planning. Whether this debate was foreseen or not, confidence now hinges on demonstrating that estate reform enables long-term defence strategy, not just short-term budget repair.

The audit is correct: Defence doesn't need to own every facility it occupies. Rationalisation is necessary if scarce sustainment funding is to be concentrated on infrastructure that is genuinely fit for purpose. The challenge lies not in the principle of divestment but in the credibility of the financial assumptions underpinning it.

The audit predicts net proceeds of approximately A$1.8 billion, supported by expected annual savings of around A$100 million and the avoidance of up to A$3 billion in future maintenance costs. These figures warrant closer examination. The estimated A$1.2 billion relocation and transition cost doesn't appear to fully account for escalation risks or cumulative preparatory costs already incurred.

The report acknowledges that existing processes are slow and ill-suited to managing multiple divestments simultaneously. Over two decades, disposals have repeatedly stalled due to contamination, heritage obligations and political hesitation. Defence's long-running Maribyrnong site divestment illustrates the cost of delay: Defence continues to incur approximately A$2.8 million annually in holding costs that earlier decisions could have avoided.

Further testing of relocation, remediation and avoided cost assumptions is therefore essential. Without rigorous assurance, projected efficiencies risk appearing aspirational rather than demonstrable. The audit was very clear that where divestment proceeds are pursued, Defence should default to open-market sales based on highest and best use.

The report's seventh recommendation proposes that Defence and the Department of Finance jointly manage proceeds, with funds first supporting further divestments before contributing to broader Defence Strategic Review priorities. Crucially, this does not guarantee reinvestment back into the estate itself. As outlined in the audit, infrastructure has often been delivered without corresponding sustainment funding, leading to premature degradation and higher lifecycle costs. Unless funding transfers are consistently enforced, estate reform risks repeating this cycle.

Some of the proposed divestments raise practical and security considerations. Swan Island illustrates the complexity, with concerns raised about divesting the existing public golf course and the implications for site security and land management. The terrain is only marginally functional for golf and poorly suited to residential development. The island is now accessible on foot, reducing its isolation. In such circumstances, environmental conservation or revised boundary arrangements may provide a more coherent outcome than commercial sale, preserving operational security while recognising limited redevelopment value.

Heritage decisions have become the emotional centre of the debate, particularly regarding sites such as Fort Queenscliff, HMAS Penguin and Victoria Barracks in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. These locations have attracted intense public attention because they represent Defence's connection to national identity.

But this isn't a choice between preservation and disposal. Structured peppercorn leases—arrangements involving nominal rent while retaining federal ownership—could transfer stewardship of heritage sites to trusts or public institutions reducing sustainment liabilities while retaining ownership protections and guaranteeing public access. Ground leases and adaptive reuse models would similarly allow Defence to generate revenue while safeguarding historically significant buildings.

This approach could also address a longstanding issue: Defence maintains more than 130 museums and heritage displays, yet roughly 80 percent remain largely inaccessible to the public. Estate reform presents an opportunity to improve both stewardship and accessibility.

Victoria Barracks demonstrates how contested decisions could become exemplars of balanced reform. Conditional sales or partial redevelopment—tied to conservation requirements and public access— would allow value realisation while preserving national heritage outcomes. Managed strategically, such sites could strengthen public confidence.

The audit's methodology also raises concerns about consultation. Delivery within six months by a small team risked under-engagement with affected communities. Compressed timelines may accelerate reform but constrain understanding of operational consequences.

More concerning is the absence of structured consultation with Australian Defence Force Reserves and cadet communities during the two years the recommendations sat with the government. Estate decisions directly affect participation, accessibility and retention, all of which are central to mobilisation depth and national resilience.

The potential loss of facilities supporting units, such as the Pilbara Regiment's leased rifle range, is an example of this risk. The regiment's effectiveness depends on geographically anchored personnel and local training access. Removing infrastructure that generates little financial return may appear efficient but risks undermining capabilities whose value lies in presence and community integration.

These issues are particularly significant as Defence reviews the future operating model of the ADF Reserves. Estate decisions affecting ADF Reserve viability should be addressed through a dedicated study aligned with workforce and mobilisation requirements, rather than proceeding in parallel.

Ultimately, the audit exposed longstanding weaknesses in estate governance. Inner-city leased accommodation remains underutilised, infrastructure procurement timelines are excessive and decision-making processes remain slow and complex. These inefficiencies intersect with growing pressures from workplace safety compliance and climate adaptation to major initiatives such as establishing a new east coast base.

Last week's parliamentary hearings underscored these gaps and helped explain what is being sold. But more communication is needed on why the divestment strategy will strengthen deterrence, what capability will replace divested assets and how workforce impacts will be mitigated. Estate reform also requires different solutions for different land—not all land generates strategic value through divestment. Therefore, Defence needs to clearly explain the reasoning behind its divestment choices.

Until those questions are answered, the Defence Estate Audit will continue to be judged not as a reform of infrastructure, but as a test of strategic clarity itself.

Published on 17 February 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/without-clarity-defence-estate-audit-tests-australias-trust/

Australia needs northern engine to power defence

John Coyne

Image: Jacob Joseph/Department of Defence.

Australia's defence strategy now points north, but the nation still lacks the systems required to fight and sustain operations there. Strategic documents have identified northern Australia as the decisive geography for deterrence and denial, yet capability, infrastructure and industry haven't kept pace with that ambition. Australia must now build what our latest ASPI report calls the Northern Engine: a fully integrated defence ecosystem capable of launching, sustaining, repairing and innovating military power across the Indo-Pacific.

Defence policy has delivered unusual clarity about geography. The 2016 Defence White Paper, the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the 2023 Defence Strategic Review and the 2024 National Defence Strategy all identify northern Australia as important to the defence posture. Yet strategy has advanced faster than execution. Northern Australia still operates as a loose collection of bases, infrastructure upgrades and exercises rather than a coherent operating system capable of sustaining high-tempo operations.

Northern Australia offers extraordinary advantages, proximity to the archipelagic arc, vast training areas and direct access to the Indo-Pacific, but those advantages remain underdeveloped because the systems needed to convert geography into operational power remain fragmented.

The result is a growing strategic mismatch. Australian strategy increasingly depends on operating forward from the north. Yet the infrastructure, logistics, architecture and industrial base required to sustain those operations remain incomplete. Capability diversity in the Northern Territory has also thinned in recent years as mechanised forces, aviation and other enabling capabilities shifted south. Capability positioned in the theatre provides options and responsiveness that cannot be recreated during a crisis.

Meanwhile, the United States has invested heavily through the US Force Posture Initiatives, expanding fuel storage, runway infrastructure and training capacity across northern bases. Bomber rotations, Marine Rotational Force–Darwin deployments

and joint logistics planning have grown steadily. Washington has clearly concluded that northern Australia forms a keystone of Indo-Pacific force posture.

Australia, therefore, faces an uncomfortable asymmetry. US forces increasingly rely on northern Australia as an operational hub, while Australian capability in that region remains uneven. Sovereign resilience requires Australia to anchor that ecosystem, not merely host it.

Our report proposes a way forward through the concept of the Northern Engine: a framework that treats northern Australia as a frontier national operating system.

Four interconnected functions define that system.

Northern Australia must launch and lodge forces. Hardened and dispersed airbases, amphibious staging areas and scalable accommodation must enable rapid deployment into the archipelagic arc and sustained operations once forces arrive.

Northern Australia must sustain and repair forces. Darwin and other northern hubs must support forward logistics, maritime sustainment, battle-damage repair and deep fuel and munitions storage. Long internal supply chains stretching from southern Australia slow operations and weaken resilience.

Northern Australia must test and innovate. Vast training areas and controlled airspace provide ideal conditions for testing emerging capabilities such as autonomous systems, long-range strike and advanced surveillance technologies.

Northern Australia must connect and export. The north sits between southern industrial capacity and Indo-Pacific operational demand. Strategic logistics corridors linking Adelaide to Darwin and Brisbane to Townsville must connect domestic industry with forward operations.

Together, those roles transform northern Australia from a cluster of bases into an integrated defence ecosystem capable of generating national and allied combat power.

Several structural gaps currently prevent that transformation.

Australia still lacks a published concept of operations for northern theatre logistics. That means that infrastructure investment, industry planning and allied posture development proceed without a shared blueprint.

Fuel and munitions infrastructure remains too shallow to sustain prolonged operations. Storage, dispersal and survivability require urgent expansion.

Northern industrial ecosystems struggle to scale without predictable Defence demand signals. Sustainment capacity will grow only when basing decisions and operational concepts provide long-term certainty.

Workforce constraints across housing, health care and skilled labour continue to limit northern expansion. Governance fragmentation further complicates delivery, as defence infrastructure, industry development and regional growth initiatives proceed through separate bureaucratic channels.

Australia must therefore shift from incremental upgrades to systemic design.

The government should publish a northern theatre logistics and basing concept of operations, strengthen the Darwin maritime sustainment precinct, expand fuel and munitions storage, establish a northern test and evaluation ecosystem, and formally recognise the logistics corridors linking southern industry with northern operations. Coordinated delivery across governments and industry will prove essential.

Northern Australia will determine whether Australia's defence strategy succeeds or fails. Building the Northern Engine now will ensure the nation's most important geography becomes the backbone of its defence posture rather than its greatest vulnerability.

Published on 17 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-needs-northern-engine-to-power-defence/

New marine complex is a test for achieving Northern Territory industrial capability

John Coyne

Image: Northern Territory government.

Strategic geography creates opportunity. It does not create industry. Northern Australia now faces a simple test: can the Northern Territory turn its position at the edge of the Indo-Pacific into real industrial capability? The Northern Marine Complex at East Arm on Darwin Harbour will show whether defence demand, infrastructure planning and commercial investment can finally move in the same direction.

The Northern Territory government's February decision to declare the Northern Marine Complex a Territory Development Area creates a governance mechanism to align land use, infrastructure sequencing and industrial clustering. That decision addresses a long-standing weakness. Projects at East Arm and Middle Arm have too often advanced in isolation. Port upgrades, energy proposals,

Defence works, logistics planning and workforce development have progressed on different timelines and under different strategic logics. Fragmentation has constrained private investment and diluted returns to national security.

The 2024 National Defence Strategy places northern Australia at the centre of force posture, sustainment and resilience planning. The US Department of Defense now exerts measurable influence over the territory's economy through the US Force Posture Initiatives. Marine rotations, bomber deployments and sustainment contracts inject capital, shape infrastructure priorities and alter commercial risk calculations. Defence activity now functions as a structural economic driver in the Northern Territory.

That structural role demands policy coherence.

The Northern Marine Complex integrates the Darwin Ship Lift and the Marine Industry Park into a single industrial platform. The ship lift represents critical enabling infrastructure. Its strategic value lies in the industrial density it can attract: marine engineering firms, fabrication workshops, digital sustainment providers, logistics operators and specialist trades. Industrial density lowers transaction costs, improves workforce retention and supports scalable maintenance capability.

Infrastructure alone won't sustain that ecosystem; predictable demand will.

Defence requires a reliable northern industrial base capable of sustaining vessels; supporting allied maintenance, repair and overhaul activity; and providing surge capacity under operational pressure. That requirement aligns with the territory's economic interests. It requires visible and sustained commitments to maintaining vessels in Darwin and structuring maintenance cycles that allow local firms to invest with confidence.

Speculation that Defence may reduce the number of Royal Australian Navy patrol boats home-ported in Darwin warrants scrutiny. Officials may argue that increased rotations of larger vessels can offset a reduced permanent presence. That reasoning doesn't address industrial dynamics.

Patrol boats generate steady, repeatable maintenance cycles. They anchor apprenticeships, specialist trades and supply-chain continuity. Larger amphibious vessels create higher-value but less frequent maintenance peaks. A viable ecosystem depends on both continuity and scale. Remove the steady workload, and firms face greater volatility. Volatility deters capital investment and workforce development. Patrol boats and larger vessels serve distinct operational purposes. From an industrial perspective, they also perform complementary functions.

Forward posture extends beyond platform numbers. It encompasses where deep maintenance occurs, where inventory positions are, where data systems integrate sustainment planning and where skilled workers establish long-term careers. If permanent maintenance footprints shift south, capital and expertise will follow.

This issue extends beyond ship repair. Australia's northern strategy emphasises access, sustainment depth and infrastructure resilience. Allied forces will operate more frequently from northern Australia. That activity generates demand across energy supply, fuel storage, logistics networks, secure digital systems and workforce accommodation. If those enabling capabilities concentrate outside the Northern Territory, the territory will host activity without capturing enduring industrial benefit.

Declaring the Northern Marine Complex a Territory Development Area represents a necessary first step. The next phase requires synchronisation across portfolios and jurisdictions.

Whole-of-government coordination should align Defence basing decisions with infrastructure financing, port planning, energy resilience investments and vocational training pipelines. The Treasury and the Infrastructure, Industry and Defence departments must operate against a shared northern industrial roadmap. US Force Posture Initiative planning should integrate with local industry development rather than proceed in parallel streams.

Industry also needs to calibrate its approach. Firms need clearer forward maintenance schedules, longer contract horizons and transparent project pipelines to justify capital expenditure. Public–private partnership models and staged capacity commitments can reduce risk and accelerate capability growth.

The Northern Territory stands at a practical inflection point. Defence demand has increased. Allied engagement has expanded. Infrastructure-enabling works have commenced. Without policy alignment, those elements will coexist without a compounding effect. With coordination, they can reinforce one another and produce a resilient industrial ecosystem that strengthens both national security outcomes and commercial viability.

The Northern Marine Complex offers a focal point for that alignment. Government efforts should sequence enabling works with discipline. Defence should structure maintenance commitments that provide industrial continuity. Allies should incorporate local sustainment planning into operational design. Industry should invest in scalable capability linked to credible demand.

Strategic geography created the opportunity. Execution, coordination and commercial realism will determine whether the Northern Territory converts that opportunity into durable industrial depth.

Published on 10 April 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/new-marine-complex-is-a-test-for-achieving-northern-territory-industrial-capability/

Connect – northern Australia in the Indo-Pacific

Littoral manoeuvre will need northern Australian support

John Coyne

Image: Austal.

Discussion of the Australian Defence Force's planned littoral-manoeuvre capability is too narrow, focusing on ships, ranges and geography. Defence should treat it as an alliance-enabled industrial and economic program that delivers through measurable readiness, resilient sustainment and integrated coalition operations.

The 2023 Defence Strategic Review directed that 'Australia's Army must be transformed and optimised for littoral manoeuvre operations by sea, land and air from Australia'—projecting land forces ashore or along coasts and using the land to exert control over the sea. This explicitly tied force structure reform to a strategy focused on Australia's northern approaches. A year later, the 2024 National Defence Strategy reinforced that orientation, adopting a deterrence-by-denial strategy aimed at preventing adversaries from projecting power against Australia and coercing the region.

Direction and doctrine alone, however, do not create deterrence. Denial works only when an adversary judges that it cannot achieve objectives quickly, at acceptable cost and without unacceptable escalation risk. A judgement shaped by credible joint capability, sustained availability and the demonstrated ability to operate cohesively with allies at speed.

In practical terms, denial in Australia's northern approaches means preventing a rapid lodgement, constraining coercive operations against regional partners, and denying freedom of manoeuvre across key sea lanes. That outcome depends on joint integration: maritime connectors; long-range firepower; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; air mobility; targeting networks; and protected communications—all operating as a cohesive system. Sustainment is not peripheral to that system. It determines whether lift, strike and surveillance persist beyond the first week of crisis.

The government has committed A$4 billion to the army's future fleet of heavy landing craft (LCHs), contracting for eight to be built at Henderson in Western Australia. Displacing about 4,000 tonnes, each will be capable of carrying loads exceeding 500 tonnes. Construction will commence in 2026, final delivery being projected for 2038. Those ships will enable manoeuvre and sustainment of land forces across the Indo-Pacific. They also expose the timeline challenge.

The strategic environment will test Australia's posture well before the fleet is fully delivered in 2038. Near-term credibility must come from forward sustainment capacity, pre-positioned stocks, hardened northern infrastructure and expanded technical workforce pipelines. Equipment acquisition that outpaces maintenance and workforce growth risks producing capacity without availability.

The denial mechanism is straightforward. Forward maintenance reduces transit time and increases availability of ships, aircraft and ground vehicles. Higher availability enables sustained lift and persistent strike arcs from northern bases. Shorter repair cycles compress vulnerability windows and complicate adversary targeting timelines. Distributed and hardened sustainment nodes increase uncertainty in an adversary planning. Uncertainty raises its operational risk. Increased risk elevates its cost. That elevated cost strengthens our deterrence.

Alliance integration amplifies that effect. Collective deterrence rests on partners' ability to act cohesively and rapidly, not sequentially. Interoperable maintenance standards, shared certification regimes, and aligned logistics systems reduce friction in coalition operations. Forward sustainment activity at HMAS Stirling, linked to the Submarine Rotational Force–West from 2027, demonstrates how sustainment can anchor allied operational continuity in the north. Extending similar integration to connectors, land systems and enabling capabilities would strengthen the coalition's denial posture.

Budget settings reinforce strategic obligation. Defence funding over the coming decade totals A$765 billion, including A$330 billion allocated to capabilities under the Integrated Investment Program. Funding is projected to exceed 2.3 percent of GDP in the early 2030s. Investment at that scale demands prioritisation. If sustainment metrics aren't embedded early, capital acquisition will crowd out readiness. Availability rates, maintenance cycle times, spares depth and certified workforce numbers should be treated as strategic indicators because they determine how quickly the government can translate intent into effect.

Training technicians to a satisfactory standard can longer to expand than platforms take to build. Housing availability, energy reliability and supply chain diversification in northern hubs directly affect operational tempo. Sustainment nodes must also be survivable: distributed, hardened and supported by redundant communications. Concentrated infrastructure that cannot withstand disruption weakens denial credibility.

Multinational exercises such as Talisman Sabre provide a testing ground. Exercises at that scale should validate repair throughput, logistics coordination and joint targeting integration under realistic stress. Denial requires practical validation of integrated methods, not simply declared ends and funded means.

Northern Territory Defence Week offers Defence an opportunity to convert strategic narrative into operational clarity for industry and partners. Defence may not yet have final answers on every element of sustainment design, workforce scale, regulatory alignment or infrastructure sequencing. Some matters are subject to alliance negotiations, capability gate decisions and operational sensitivities. Transparency doesn't require full disclosure; it requires structured signalling.

Defence should share what's known now: indicative availability ambitions for the LCHs and associated systems; broad sustainment concepts; projected workforce demand bands; and intended models for allied integration. Defence should also identify clearly what remains undecided and when key decisions are expected. Decision timelines tied to budget cycles, capability gates, or alliance milestones provide investment confidence even as details evolve.

Industry scales when demand signals are predictable and anchored in joint operational concepts. Partners invest when institutional mechanisms enable rapid, cohesive action. Adversaries reassess coercive options when deployment timelines are compressed, sustainment is resilient, and coalition forces can operate as a unified system.

Littoral manoeuvre is a national readiness architecture that links posture, industry, and alliances to deny adversaries operational freedom in Australia's northern approaches. Strategic credibility will be judged by how quickly Australia and its partners can move, sustain and reinforce force, and whether that capability is sufficiently cohesive and resilient to alter an adversary's calculus before a crisis begins.

Published on 5 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/littoral-manoeuvre-will-need-northern-australian-support/

For northern logistics, communication is key

John Coyne

Image: Shane Cameron/Department of Defence.

Australia can deploy forces to northern Australia quickly. But sustaining them at scale still depends on a handful of freight corridors, limited fuel depth and commercial logistics networks that Defence hasn't clearly incorporated into an operational concept. Defence should release a non-classified Northern Theatre Logistics Concept of Operations (CONOPS) to provide governments, allies and industry with the clarity needed to build the logistics system Australia needs.

Old management advice says 'clarity is kindness'. In the Northern Territory, clarity also drives investment decisions, infrastructure planning and workforce development.

The stakes justify that demand. Defence activity accounts for roughly 9 percent of the Northern Territory economy, compared with about 2 percent nationally. Major investments now underway include more than A$1.5 billion for the RAAF Base Tindal redevelopment, A$746 million for the US Force Posture Initiatives training areas and ranges project, A$600 million for the Larrakeyah Defence Precinct upgrade and A$427 million for MQ-4C Triton facilities at Tindal. Those investments expand operational capacity in the north. They don't explain how the logistics system sustaining those forces will function during sustained operations.

Strategic language won't unlock private investment. A freight operator cannot justify expanding heavy vehicle fleets based on broad references to deterrence. A port operator cannot sequence new berths, storage areas and logistics yards on general statements about resilience. A fuel supplier cannot determine storage depth without clearer signals about operational demand.

Industry doesn't need war plans. Industry needs operationally useful guidance on the logistics architecture that Defence expects to rely on across northern Australia. Such a concept should identify priority freight corridors, outline expectations for fuel resilience, explain how multimodal logistics will function and signal where redundancy will matter more than efficiency.

Allied militaries already recognise the problem. The US Department of Defense now prioritises 'prevailing in contested logistics' through its Regional Sustainment Framework, which focuses on

distributed sustainment networks across the Indo-Pacific and deeper integration with commercial logistics providers. Australia's northern planning should follow the same logic.

A Northern Theatre Logistics CONOPS would translate that strategic shift into practical planning signals.

Start with corridors. Northern Australia relies on a small number of decisive logistics arteries, including the Stuart Highway and the Adelaide–Darwin railway. The rail line carried about 2.7 million tonnes of freight in 2022–23 and provides the Territory's only heavy rail connection to southern supply chains. Any disruption, whether from weather, infrastructure failure or deliberate interference, would immediately constrain the flow of fuel, ammunition, equipment and general sustainment moving north. Defence mobilisation during a crisis would significantly increase pressure on that corridor, and industry needs to know where Defence expects surge capacity, redundancy or infrastructure hardening.

Fuel represents an even more unforgiving constraint. Military operations depend on a reliable fuel supply. Yet Australia's oil stocks averaged around 50 days of net imports in 2024–25, well below the International Energy Agency benchmark of 90 days. Aviation fuel demand from northern air operations, maritime refuelling requirements and ground mobility over long distances would rapidly increase fuel consumption during a crisis. Northern Australia already hosts important storage infrastructure, but the market still lacks guidance on whether Defence expects deeper commercial stockpiles, more distributed storage or stronger redundancy in fuel distribution networks.

Multimodal integration presents the next challenge. Northern Australia's strategic advantage lies in connecting maritime ports, air bases, road corridors and rail networks into a theatre logistics system. Darwin Port remains the only port between Townsville and Fremantle with direct access to road, rail, pipeline and airport infrastructure. The port supported more than 2,200 trading vessel visits and over 3,300 pilotage movements in 2024–25, illustrating its role as the Territory's logistics gateway. Effective theatre logistics will require those networks to function together under pressure rather than as separate systems.

Allied presence already places growing demands on that system. Marine Rotational Force–Darwin brings up to 2,500 US Marines and sailors to the Territory each year. Those rotations increase demand for fuel, freight and infrastructure across the Territory during the training season and would scale rapidly during a crisis.

The challenge ultimately reflects a systems problem. Theatre logistics in Northern Australia need ports, freight corridors, fuel networks, logistics companies, skilled workers and allied sustainment requirements to function simultaneously. Disruption in one component quickly cascades across the rest: a rail interruption, for example, delays fuel deliveries; fuel shortages constrain air operations; and reduced sortie generation weakens operational tempo.

NT Defence Week provides the ideal venue to start addressing that challenge. The event brings together Defence leaders, industry and policymakers to discuss the region's evolving strategic role. Canberra should use that forum to move beyond general recognition of northern Australia's importance and provide practical guidance on theatre logistics.

Northern Australia already hosts the ports, air bases, training areas and logistics networks that allied forces will depend on in a crisis. Defence now needs to tell governments and industry how the sustainment system behind them will actually work.

Clarity will not only be kind. It will help build the logistics architecture that credible deterrence in the Indo-Pacific now requires.

Published on 18 March 2026. For print readers, the original article with live links is at: https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/for-northern-logistics-communication-is-key/

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