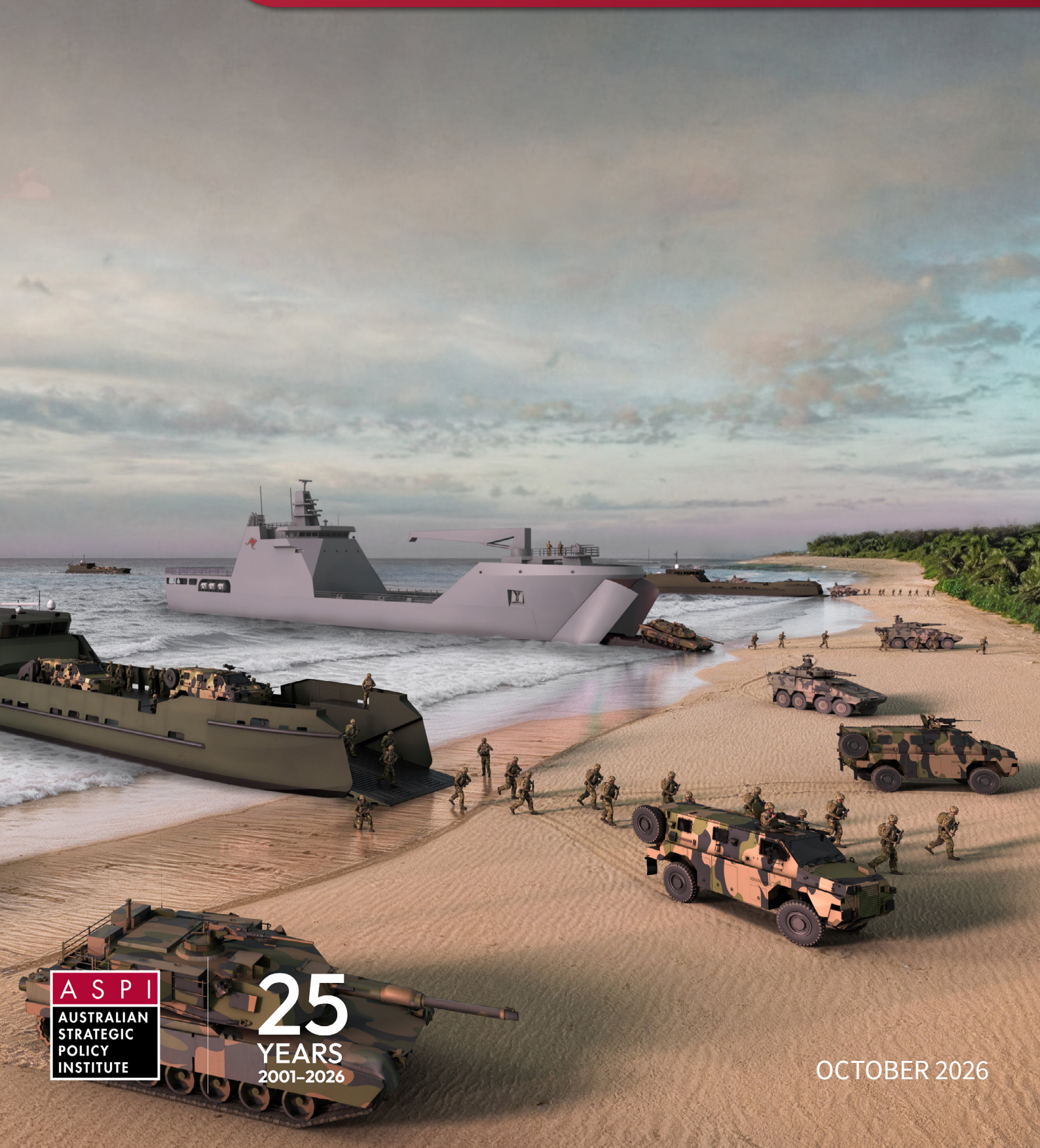


Making the littoral force operational

The logistics of Australia's Northern Theatre

REPORT

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Cover image: Littoral manoeuvre capability concept scene, Defence image library, [online](#).

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Executive summary

New capabilities can project combat power into the littorals. Resilient logistics will determine whether Australia can sustain them.

The 2026 National Defence Strategy (NDS) directs the Australian Army to optimise for littoral manoeuvre and long-range strike across Australia's northern land and maritime approaches. The ADF is acquiring a new littoral fleet, long-range fires, upgraded armoured and aviation capabilities, and deployable health and logistics systems. At the same time, growing allied and regional partner activity is increasing the demand on northern infrastructure and logistics.

The Army's emerging littoral force will be geographically dispersed across northern Australia. It must move and operate across sea, shore and inland environments and remain effective when individual routes, facilities or supply chains are disrupted.

The 'northern theatre logistics system'¹ is the combination of bases, ports, airfields, corridors, stocks, workforce, health support and commercial capacity through which the ADF generates, moves, sustains and regenerates force in the north. This report examines those components as a single system. That's an analytical framing rather than a description of how Defence currently organises its logistics planning, which operates across services, commands, capability programs and functional networks.

Many of the physical and industrial components of a northern logistics system are now being built or expanded. New landing craft, northern bases, ports, fuel and maintenance infrastructure, deployable logistics and health capabilities, regional industry and allied sustainment arrangements are all contributing to the emerging system. Less visible is how those components are intended to work together, the capacity they're expected to provide, and the civilian infrastructure and commercial services on which they depend. Those dependencies matter because the military logistics chain relies on ports, fuel, roads, rail, shipping, stevedoring, heavy transport, engineering, warehousing, health services and workforce capacity that sit partly outside Defence.

The priority isn't simply to build more infrastructure. It's for Defence to provide greater visibility of the northern logistics system, clarify how its principal nodes and supporting networks are intended to function together, identify critical civilian dependencies and provide industry with enough certainty about future requirements to invest in the capacity needed to support it.

A northern logistics system needs to move, sustain and regenerate a dispersed force when normal routes and supply chains are under pressure. Whether the system can do that will depend not only on the infrastructure Defence owns, but on the wider network of civilian and commercial capacity on which it relies.

Policy recommendations

1. Publish the northern logistics requirements and dependencies

Defence should provide state and territory governments and industry with greater visibility of the northern theatre logistics system that it's building. This should set out the functions of major operating and supporting nodes, the movement and sustainment tasks they're expected to perform, and the civilian infrastructure, services and supply chains on which they depend.

The information should identify, where possible, the assumptions underpinning the northern theatre logistics system, including civilian requirements for air and port access, fuel, road and rail capacity, shipping, stevedoring, heavy transport, maintenance, warehousing, health services and workforce. It should provide sufficient visibility of future requirements to allow state and territory governments and industry to prepare infrastructure, facilities, equipment and workforce capacity, without disclosing operationally sensitive information. This should include indicative demand, sequencing and priorities where possible, recognising the long lead times for infrastructure, workforce and industrial investment and enabling civilian providers to identify constraints and opportunities to expand capacity.

2. Define how the northern logistics network is intended to work as a system

Defence should provide early clarity on the future littoral force, including the number and location of landing craft in Southeast and North Queensland and Darwin, and the arrangements for their sustainment and deep maintenance. It should also define the complementary roles of the major northern operating and logistics nodes and their connections to the national logistics system and civilian infrastructure. This clarity is needed now, rather than once the vessels enter service, to give state and territory governments and industry sufficient lead time to plan and invest in the facilities, workforce, maintenance, supply chains, transport and support infrastructure required to sustain the force.

Joint Logistics Command (JLC) already manages the military logistics chain. The issue is the interface between that chain and the commercial infrastructure and services on which it depends. Greater visibility of how those elements are intended to work together would help to identify gaps, duplication and single points of dependency and provide a clearer basis for infrastructure and industry investment.

3. Identify and strengthen critical civilian capacity

Defence, state and territory governments and industry should identify the civilian infrastructure and commercial capacity that's critical to sustaining northern operations and where failure or disruption would materially affect the logistics network. This should include fuel, ports, shipping, road and rail, stevedoring, heavy transport, engineering, warehousing, communications and other essential services.

Where critical capacity is concentrated, commercially dependent or difficult to replace, the federal government should consider appropriate measures to provide resilience, redundancy or assured access. This should build on existing government arrangements rather than duplicate them, with the focus on identifying where the northern theatre remains dependent on capacity that might not be available under sustained operational pressure.

4. Give industry a clearer basis for investing in northern sustainment capacity

Defence should provide greater certainty about the sustainment activities and capabilities it expects industry to support in northern Australia. This includes regional maintenance, engineering, recovery, fabrication, transport, maritime services and workforce capacity, as well as opportunities to complement Australian and allied sustainment requirements.

The emerging network of fixed and deployable logistics capabilities should be used to identify where regional industry can provide additional capacity or redundancy. Sustained demand, appropriate contracting arrangements, security and technical accreditation and workforce pathways will be needed if industry is expected to invest beyond episodic exercise support.

Introduction

The Australian Army is reorienting the way it operates, shifting its operational focus to the littoral to project and sustain land power across the maritime environment and to contribute directly to sea denial and maritime power projection. Under the 2026 National Defence Strategy (NDS),² littoral manoeuvre with a long-range strike capability is the Army's stated adaptation priority.

In Australia's northern theatre,³ this has practical consequences. Land, sea, airspace, maritime approaches and the infrastructure connecting them are interdependent. The Army's ability to operate in the littoral therefore depends not only on combat platforms, but on the logistics, infrastructure, health, maintenance, workforce and commercial systems that allow those forces to move and remain in operation.

Littoral manoeuvre applies well beyond northern Australia, extending across the archipelagic arc and wider near region. The north is nevertheless where much of the force is generated, staged and sustained, making northern Australia a critical part of the logistics system supporting the concept.⁴

A note on terms

The Australian Army's Contribution to the NDS (ACNDS) defines the littoral as the areas of the sea that influence the land and the areas of the land that influence the sea.

Logistics is the movement and support of forces. Sustainment is the broader provision of logistics, health and personnel support that gives a force operational reach and endurance. Logistics is what moves; sustainment is what endures.

Defence doesn't formally define a northern theatre. This report uses the term for the operating area covering northern Australia

and its northern approaches within the primary area of military interest, together with the bases, ports, airfields, corridors and civil infrastructure that generate, move, sustain and regenerate force within it.

The term 'system' is used in this report to describe the interaction between those components and the outputs they need to produce. This is an analytical framing, not a claim that Defence doesn't have established logistics structures, responsibilities or readiness standards.

The Army identifies four core requirements: fight and win in the littorals; strike at long range; win the close fight; and integrate with the ADF, allies, partners and sovereign industry.

The Army is reorganising and equipping accordingly, including through a dedicated Littoral Manoeuvre Group (LMG) and the acquisition of new amphibious landing craft designed to operate across the land-sea interface.⁵ Littoral manoeuvre is more than a new Army capability. It changes how the ADF generates, moves, sustains and regenerates military power across northern Australia, over greater distances and from dispersed locations.

The NDS also emphasises self-reliance, preparedness and resilience, recognising that the ADF must sustain credible military power in contested conditions. Contested conditions aren't limited to physical attacks on military bases. Disruption in the northern theatre could include long-range strike against fixed logistics nodes, and cyber or electronic attack against defence and civilian critical infrastructure. It also includes the wet season and cyclones, which routinely close routes without any adversary involved.

The NDS provides the overarching strategic framework for Australia's defence posture, including the role of northern Australia.

The defence strategies of the Northern Territory,⁶ Queensland⁷ and Western Australia⁸ provide complementary state and territory perspectives, particularly on the infrastructure, industry, workforce and regional development dimensions of the northern Defence posture.

Australia is already building many of the components required to support this force: new landing craft, northern bases, ports, fuel and energy infrastructure, maintenance and repair facilities, deployable logistics and health capabilities, regional industry and allied sustainment arrangements. Defence is also testing options for additional fixed logistics capacity in Alice Springs and Central Queensland.

The effectiveness of the broader northern logistics system will depend on how those components connect, the capacity

they provide and the infrastructure, services and commercial supply chains on which they rely. Many of those dependencies sit outside the Defence organisation. Ports, fuel terminals, roads, rail, shipping, stevedoring, heavy transport, engineering, warehousing and workforce capacity all contribute to the ability to sustain military operations.

This report examines the northern theatre as a single logistics system, encompassing the principal operating nodes in Darwin, Townsville and northwestern Australia and supporting depth in Brisbane (and potentially Alice Springs and Central Queensland). It considers how those nodes connect, the civilian and commercial dependencies that underpin them, and the visibility required by governments and industry to prepare for the logistics demands of a more dispersed northern force.

The northern littoral theatre

The littorals are the gateway for Australia's economic connection to the region and the world. Around 99% of international trade transits coastal waters and shipping lanes, goods move through coastal ports and airports, and the submarine cables carrying Australia's digital connectivity make landfall on the same shores.⁹

For the Army, the littoral extends well beyond the shoreline. It encompasses coastal, jungle, riverine and urban terrain, together with the ports, airfields, energy infrastructure and maritime routes that shape movement and access across northern Australia (Figure 1). As the Army puts it, these environments are historically where Australia has fought in the region, and increasingly where military competition is likely to occur. The Army must therefore be able to operate across a dispersed littoral theatre while retaining the ability to influence the maritime environment.¹⁰

Distance defines the problem. Townsville lies approximately 1,457 nautical miles from Darwin (roughly five days steaming), and Darwin approximately 2,258 nautical miles from Perth (roughly seven days). Deep maintenance, replenishment and industrial support for defence capability are concentrated largely outside the northern theatre, in the south and southwest.

That asymmetry is fundamental. A littoral force may operate within a day or two of its objectives while remaining several days from the maintenance, replenishment and industrial capacity on which its availability ultimately depends. Forward berthing, repair, replenishment and stockholding are therefore not regional support measures but determinants of operational availability. The further a capability must travel for sustainment, the less time it's available for operations.

The United States Marine Corps (USMC) recognised this problem in its *Force Design 2020*,¹¹ identifying logistics as both a critical requirement and a critical vulnerability, and calling for more distributable platforms able to sustain forces across a challenging littoral theatre. Its response has been to push sustainment closer to dispersed forces through distributed and expeditionary operations

rather than relying on a small number of large, fixed nodes. The 2025 update carried this further, with contested logistics as a headline line of effort, and an expanded global pre-positioning network across the Indo-Pacific.¹²

From concept to capability and structure

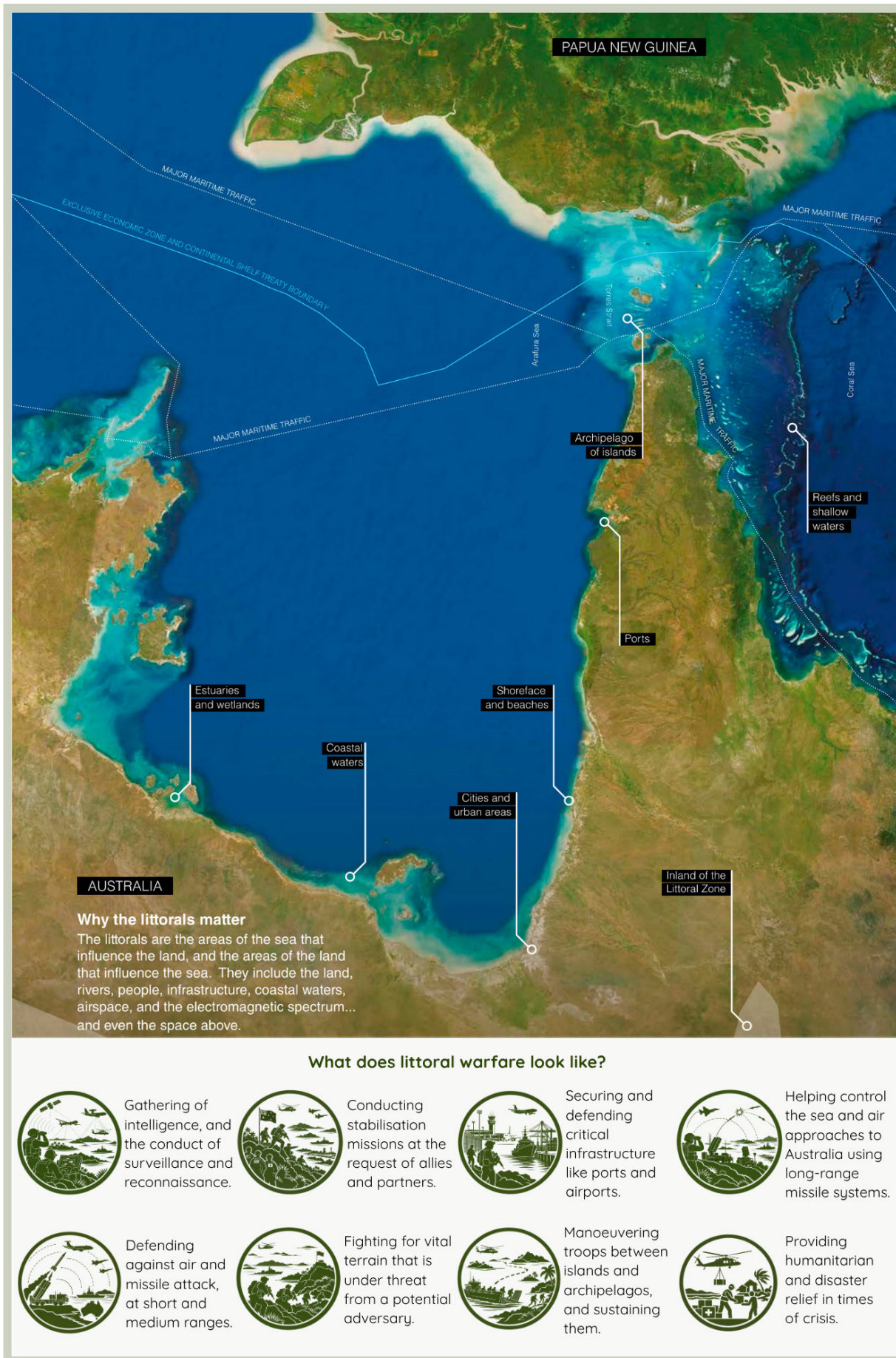
The Army defines the littoral as the areas of the sea that influence the land and the areas of the land that influence the sea. Optimising for littoral manoeuvre with a long-range strike capability is the Army's adaptation priority under the NDS and the ACNDS. It's not a capability on its own; nor is it a strategy. It's an operating approach that requires capabilities to execute, structures to command, and a logistics system to sustain.

In response, the Army's platform recapitalisation is being delivered principally through LAND 8710 – Littoral Manoeuvre Vessel Program, which will provide the Army with a new fleet of medium and heavy landing craft (Figure 2). Those vessels will give the Army the ability to move personnel, vehicles, stores and combat systems between beaches, rivers, coastal waters and island environments across the archipelagic and northern littoral, without reliance on developed port infrastructure. They restore a movement capability that the Army hasn't held at scale in decades, and they're the physical means by which a dispersed littoral force is inserted, shifted and recovered.

However, platforms alone don't constitute capability. The Army is also establishing the organisational structure to operate them as an integrated force. In March 2026, the LMG was established within 17th Sustainment Brigade at Gallipoli Barracks in Brisbane, providing the core structure for the capability, and landing craft battalions are planned for Brisbane, Darwin and Townsville.¹³

The re-establishment of a dedicated Army organisation for landing craft marks a significant shift in how the capability is managed. It's

Figure 1: Australia's littoral in the northern approaches



Source: Adapted from the ACNDS.

Figure 2: LAND 8710 Littoral Manoeuvre Program Overview



Source: Adapted from Department of Defence.

the first time in roughly 50 years that Army has had a dedicated organisation to operate and maintain a substantial landing craft fleet. Littoral manoeuvre is also moving from a specialised amphibious support task to an enduring element of how the Army generates, moves and sustains land power across the northern approaches and the Indo-Pacific.¹⁴

However, the scale of the Army's recapitalisation changes the national logistics problem. A larger fleet of more capable vessels generates demand for berthing, fuel, maintenance, spares, specialist crews and trades, training and deep sustainment at every location from which the LMG operates. Basing battalions in Darwin and Townsville distributes that demand across northern Australia rather than concentrating it, which is operationally sound but commercially and logistically harder.

That demand doesn't stop at the vessels. The purpose of the fleet is to move a dispersed land force, so every vessel-hour of availability translates into a further requirement to generate, move, sustain and regenerate the force it carries.

The success of LAND 8710 will depend not only on delivering the platforms and standing up the force structure, but on whether the northern theatre logistics system can keep them available, supplied and connected to the forces they exist to support.

Division of responsibility

The northern theatre logistics system spans multiple Defence organisations, levels of government, industry and civilian infrastructure and service providers.

Within Defence, the JLC leads the defence logistics system, including warehousing, maintenance, distribution, movements and the fuel supply chain. The Security and Estate Group provides the bases, infrastructure and services on which that system operates. The Defence Delivery Group manages platform and system acquisition and sustainment. Headquarters Joint Operations Command defines operational requirements, and National Support Division connects Defence to whole-of-government, industry and national capabilities.

The system's effectiveness depends on these actors operating across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries to provide the capacity, connectivity, resilience and readiness required.

New capabilities, new logistic demands

A force designed to fight in the littoral requires a logistics system able to move and sustain people, equipment, fuel, ammunition and supplies across the sea, shore and inland environment, rather than relying on a traditional base, road and land force model. This has significant implications for how the ADF plans, connects and distributes logistics across the northern theatre.

The littoral capability investment follows significant changes in how Army organises, distributes and sustains capabilities across the north. These changes began under Plan Beersheba in 2011 and were followed by the introduction into service of the Boxer combat reconnaissance vehicle (CRV) and Redback infantry fighting vehicle (IFV), and the 2023 decision to concentrate armoured capability in Townsville and transition 1st Brigade in Darwin towards a lighter, more agile force.¹⁵

The shift towards littoral operations places new demands on how those capabilities are integrated and sustained. Littoral and amphibious operations require land, maritime and air capabilities to operate together across brown-water, green-water and blue-water environments. They also depend on the infrastructure, logistics, health, maintenance and sustainment systems needed to keep forces operating across dispersed locations.

The new littoral manoeuvre fleet is a key part of this change. These vessels will improve the Army's ability to move and sustain forces through the straits, narrows and maritime terrain that shape Australia's northern approaches. Combined with land-based maritime strike and other joint capabilities, they'll contribute to the ADF's ability to control and deny access through those approaches.¹⁶

The broader recapitalisation extends across combat systems, vessels, mobility, logistics and sustainment, changing how the Army projects, manoeuvres and sustains combat power across

the littoral. This includes AH-64E Apache attack helicopters, upgraded Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters, M1A2 Abrams tanks, M777 lightweight howitzers, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS). Those capabilities increase the range, mobility, protection and firepower available to a littoral force, while also generating greater demand for fuel, ammunition, specialist personnel, maintenance, spares, transport and deep sustainment.

The interaction between capability introduction, northern basing and sustainment demand will shape whether the theatre logistics system can support the emerging force.

Enabling capabilities

Several enabling programs and arrangements will shape the northern theatre logistics system.

The *Defence Theatre Logistics contract*, signed with Toll Remote Logistics in August 2025, provides much of the distribution backbone, covering warehousing, national distribution and retail store services. It's intended to improve the flow of people, capabilities and supplies to bases and forward operating locations.¹⁷

The recently upgraded *deployable health capability* includes three fully equipped field hospitals, enhanced specialist surgical and trauma care, casualty evacuation and supporting logistics. Saab Australia will provide sustainment from the purpose-built support centre at Bundamba in Queensland, including maintenance, engineering, warehousing and supply support. Defence hasn't detailed how the capability will be positioned for northern operations or the medical throughput it could provide at forward locations.¹⁸

The *ship-to-shore lighterage* requirement remains at the market exploration stage. The Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG) has approached industry and academia for solutions that could provide ship-to-shore connectivity across a range of conditions, including vessels, bridging systems, ramps and floating infrastructure. The requirement reflects the limitations of landing craft alone, particularly where draft, beach gradient, surf or seabed conditions constrain access.¹⁹

Theatre logistics deployable infrastructure is being acquired under Joint Project 8218 and will provide deployable camp and logistics facilities for up to 1,500 personnel, including warehousing, power and water, waste management, fire protection and climate control. The program also includes fixed-estate upgrades and expansions at Robertson Barracks and Defence Establishment Berrimah in the Northern Territory, and RAAF Base Learmonth and the Henderson Defence Precinct in Western Australia.²⁰ The publicly identified estate investment strengthens the western and northern logistics arc from Exmouth through Henderson to Darwin, with no Townsville or Cairns sites identified under the program. As the Army develops its littoral force in North Queensland and Darwin, fixed logistics and deep sustainment will need to align with the location of landing craft and supporting forces. Without early decisions on their basing and sustainment, logistics infrastructure,

industry and workforce capacity risk lagging the platforms they're intended to support.

Defence is currently testing the market for *fixed logistics in the Northern Territory and Central Queensland*, seeking suitable land, existing facilities and potential financing and delivery models for scalable logistics facilities. Sites could require around 250 hectares of developable land and would support force sustainment and distribution. The two locations would provide different forms of logistics depth: Alice Springs would connect to major road, rail and air freight networks, while Central Queensland would provide access to road, rail, air and sea freight and proximity to the Shoalwater Bay Training Area.²¹

Together, these programs are building important components of the northern theatre logistics system across distribution, health, infrastructure and ship-to-shore movement. Fixed and deployable infrastructure, contracted civilian services and regional infrastructure will provide different forms of capacity, but they're being developed through separate programs and arrangements. The gap isn't the absence of these enablers, but limited visibility of how they connect, the capacity they're expected to provide and the civilian and commercial dependencies that need to be available for the system to sustain operations.

The US logistics integration

The Australia–US alliance is developing a distributed logistics network spanning Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory. Since 2023, US Army materiel has been prepositioned at Bandiana in Victoria, while Darwin has become an increasingly important forward logistics and operating node.

Bandiana provides established US logistics depth. Following Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023, approximately 330 US Army vehicles and trailers and 130 containers were moved there for storage, maintenance and activation.²² US investment expanded in 2026 with upgrades to warehouses and supporting infrastructure.²³

At the forward end, US force posture is expanding around Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal. Australia – United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2025 committed Australia and the US to northern and southern nodes within combined logistics networks, alongside further logistics and infrastructure development for the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin (MRF-D), including prepositioned MV-22 Osprey aircraft.²⁴

The two countries have also committed to an Enduring Logistics Support Area in Queensland, although its location and detailed function haven't been publicly released.²⁵ Queensland could provide an intermediate layer between southern logistics depth, Townsville and the northern theatre, drawing on its existing Army, aviation, logistics and defence-industry capacity.

Queensland is intended to provide an additional layer within this architecture. Both countries have been refining requirements for an enduring Logistics Support Area since 2023. While there's no publicly confirmed Southeast Queensland site for US stores, Queensland's existing Army, aviation, logistics and

defence-industry infrastructure gives the region potential to connect southern depth with Townsville and the northern theatre.

The emerging architecture combines southern depth at Bandiana, an intermediate Queensland logistics layer and forward capacity in Darwin. Its effectiveness depends on the connective system between them. Prepositioned materiel creates operational value only if it can be moved rapidly and reliably into the theatre.

For northern theatre logistics, the implication is that capacity can't be planned as a series of isolated northern nodes. It must be designed as a connected national system, with resilient movement links between strategic depth, intermediate logistics capacity and forward operating locations (Figure 3).

Figure 3: United States Force Posture Initiative overview



Source: ASPI.

Designing the future logistics system

The expansion of the Army's littoral fleet is more than a platform acquisition. It creates a new sustainment requirement across northern Australia. The question isn't just about where vessels will be based, but whether the wider system can generate, move, sustain and regenerate them and return them to operations quickly. The same applies to the forces they carry.

A littoral force is only as effective as the logistics system that keeps it moving and fighting.

Figure 4 illustrates this wider system. It connects the platforms and forces to the infrastructure, workforce, maintenance, fuel, supply, transport and distribution networks needed to generate and sustain them. It also highlights the connections between northern operating nodes and the national logistics system, recognising that much of the capacity needed in the north will be generated or supported from outside the theatre.

Fixed nodes provide depth, throughput and industrial capacity.

Deployable capacity provides reach and reduces the consequence of losing any single location.

The emerging Alice Springs and Central Queensland proposals add potential depth and distribution capacity, but neither fixed nor deployable infrastructure substitutes for a connected logistics theatre system.

One system, multiple nodes

Darwin, Townsville and northwestern Australia should be understood as the principal operating nodes of a single northern theatre logistics system, supported by Brisbane and by emerging

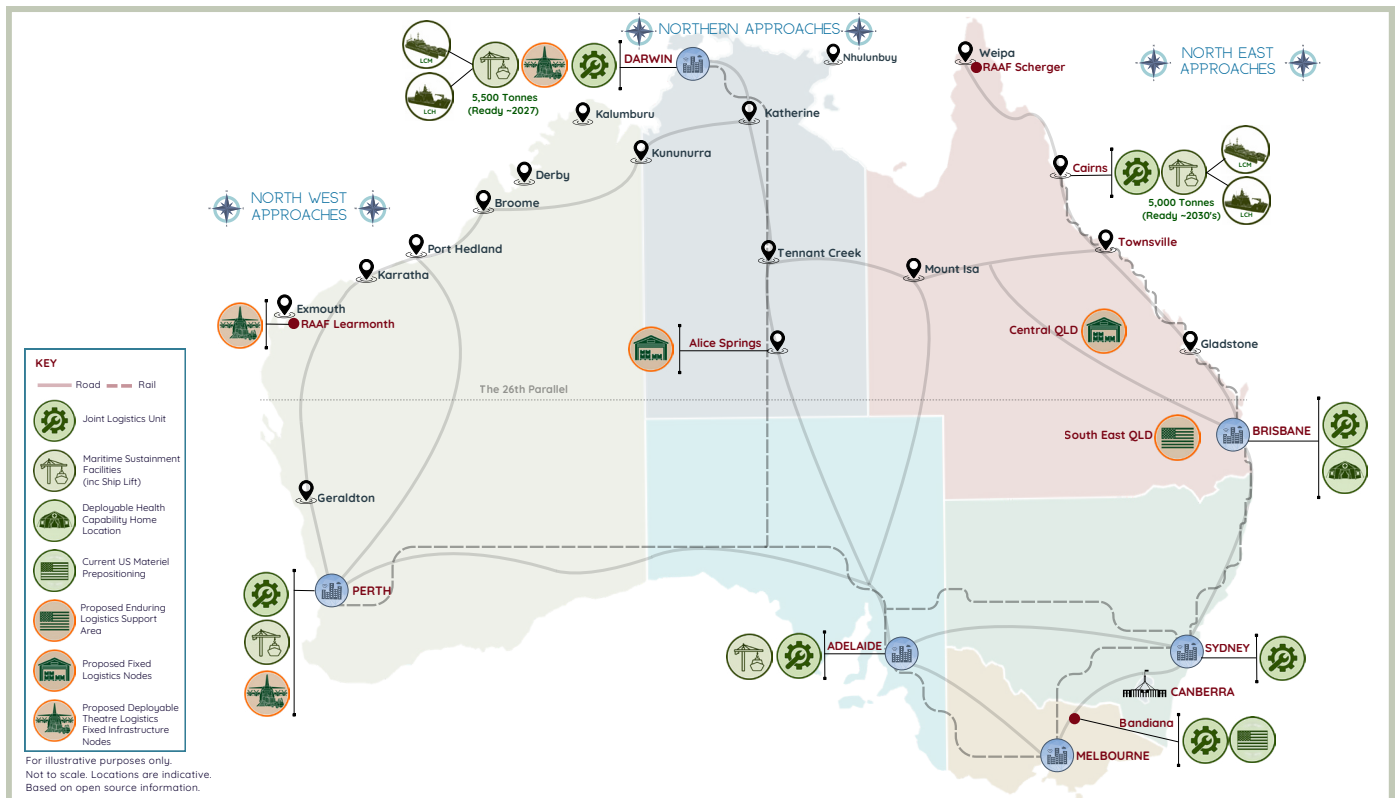
logistics nodes in Alice Springs and Central Queensland (Figure 5). Each has a distinct role.

Darwin is the closest node to the northern approaches from the Arafura and Timor seas and the focal point of Australian and allied activity. It combines a light and mobile 1st Brigade, deep port and airfield capacity, fuel infrastructure and a significant concentration of allied rotational forces, including MRF-D, which was certified in May 2026 as a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force. As the littoral manoeuvre capability expands, a landing craft battalion will be based in Darwin, making it a key point of departure for littoral operations and a node with significant exposure to disruption.

Townsville is the principal force generation and mounting base on Australia's eastern approaches into the Pacific Ocean. It holds the Army's concentrated armoured capability, aviation and combat 3rd Brigade, a deepwater port and an established sustainment industry. As the LMG expands, a second landing craft battalion will be based in Townsville to mount and sustain operations into the eastern archipelago.

Northwestern Australia provides the western axis and one of the largest gaps in maritime infrastructure across the north. It combines access to the Indian Ocean with civilian infrastructure, two bare bases, substantial energy, fuel and resource infrastructure, and an industrial base experienced in remote operations. Defence-specific sustainment capacity remains limited. Its dispersed infrastructure could provide additional options for training and forward basing of the littoral force, including deployment into the Pacific, while providing greater geographical dispersion and reducing reliance on Darwin.

Figure 4: Emerging northern theatre logistics system



Source: ASPI.

Brisbane sits behind the northern nodes but is directly coupled to them. It hosts the LMG headquarters and 1st Landing Craft Battalion at Gallipoli Barracks, motorised forces and strategic lift. One-third of the landing craft force will be generated well south of where they'll be employed, which is a defining feature of the system rather than an incidental one.

Each node holds a distinct role, and the system's value depends on whether they can reinforce and sustain one another when any one of them is degraded.

Darwin: northern force projection, sustainment and allied node

Darwin is Australia's principal northern node for force generation, projection, maritime sustainment, logistics and allied integration. Its proximity to the northern approaches, established tri-service presence, maritime and air access, growing industrial base and connection to the national north-south spine make it the foundation of a more persistent and distributed northern operating system.²⁶

Army combat and littoral force. 1st Brigade is being developed as a light, agile formation optimised for littoral operations, and will host a landing craft battalion as the LMG expands.

Strategic location. Darwin sits at the apex of Australia's northern approaches and the maritime routes into the Indo-Pacific. It's the closest node to the operating area and the most exposed to disruption.²⁷

Allied and regional presence. Darwin is the principal location for United States Force Posture Initiative (USFPI) activity in the north. The 2026 rotation involved around 2,000 USMC personnel training across Australia and the Indo-Pacific,²⁸ and the US has approved the storage and maintenance of USMC MV-22 Osprey aircraft in northern Australia. Regular multinational maritime and air activity supports deeper interoperability with Japan, India and other regional partners.

Ground transport. The Stuart Highway and Darwin-Adelaide rail form the Darwin – Katherine – Tennant Creek – Alice Springs corridor, the principal north-south land logistics spine linking northern operations to the national system, particularly Adelaide, where HIMARS and NASAMS capabilities are supported.

Maritime access. The Port of Darwin provides commercial capacity; HMAS Coonawarra and the Northern Marine Complex at East Arm provide additional berthing and hardstand.

Air access. RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal support significant multinational air activity, demonstrated by Exercise Pitch Black 2026 with more than 100 aircraft and 2,500 personnel from 21 nations participating. Airlift provides speed and resilience for personnel, high-value equipment, spares and time-sensitive materiel.

Logistics and sustainment. Defence fuel facilities at Larrakeyah Barracks and USFPI investment in bulk fuel storage at RAAF Base Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal provide a base for expanded forward stocks and distribution. Maritime sustainment runs through Regional Maintenance Centre – North (RMC-N)²⁹ and the Northern

Territory Government's emerging Northern Marine Complex, the 5,500-tonne ship lift of which would be sufficient for the future landing craft medium (LCM) and landing craft heavy (LCH).³⁰

Workforce. Darwin has an established industrial base in heavy vehicle maintenance, engineering, fabrication and logistics, supported by the resources, construction and defence sectors. This provides a substantial foundation for expanding defence-specific sustainment capacity as demand grows. Darwin can generate and project force, regenerate damaged or unavailable capability and sustain dispersed Australian and allied forces without returning every element south for support.

Townsville: northeastern combat, littoral and logistics node

Townsville is the eastern anchor of Australia's northern land force, combining a substantial combat formation with armoured and aviation capability, maritime access, training areas and multimodal logistics connections. Its proximity to the Pacific and position within Queensland's transport and industrial network make it central to generating, projecting and sustaining land and littoral forces across the northeastern approaches.

Army combat and littoral force. 3rd Brigade at Lavarack Barracks is a major source of the Army's deployable combat power, making it the principal northern combined-arms hub, and it will host a landing craft battalion as the LMG expands.³¹

Strategic location. Townsville connects North Queensland and the Pacific with road, rail, port and industrial networks, providing geographical depth and multiple routes into the theatre.

Allied and regional presence. Exercise Southern Jackaroo 2026 brought more than 3,000 Australian, US, Japanese, South Korean and Papua New Guinean personnel together under 3rd Brigade, including for combined-arms and live-fire activity.

Ground transport. Road and rail connections give Townsville depth and redundancy for moving personnel, equipment and sustainment between northern bases, ports and the southern national system.

Maritime access. The Port of Townsville supports both Defence and commercial activity. The introduction of littoral capability will create additional requirements for landing craft berthing, loading, fuel, maintenance and maritime support infrastructure.

Air access. The Army's 5th Aviation Regiment at RAAF Base Townsville provides an established aviation hub, and the consolidation of aviation and associated maintenance strengthens its role in generating and sustaining air mobility for northern land and littoral operations.

Logistics and sustainment. Townsville is the eastern distribution and sustainment node, with scope to strengthen forward logistics, maintenance and stockholding for forces operating across North Queensland and the Pacific. Queensland is investing in maritime sustainment through the Regional Maintenance Facility North East

and the Cairns Marine Precinct Common User Facility, making Townsville and Cairns complementary: Townsville centred on combat force generation, littoral manoeuvre and eastern logistics, and Cairns on additional maritime maintenance and industrial capacity.³²

Workforce. Townsville has an established industry base in heavy vehicle maintenance, engineering, fabrication and logistics.

Northwestern Australia: the western axis

Northwestern Australia provides the western axis. It has two bare bases at Learmonth and Curtin, but no naval base or defence-configured port. Instead, it has substantial commercial ports, road, rail, aviation, energy and fuel infrastructure, supported by an industrial base experienced in remote operations. Its strategic value lies in air operations, surveillance, access to the eastern Indian Ocean and northwestern approaches, and dispersed locations for training and forward basing. Its depth is predominantly commercial rather than military, making access arrangements critical to whether these assets can be brought into defence use.

Brisbane: command, generation and specialist support

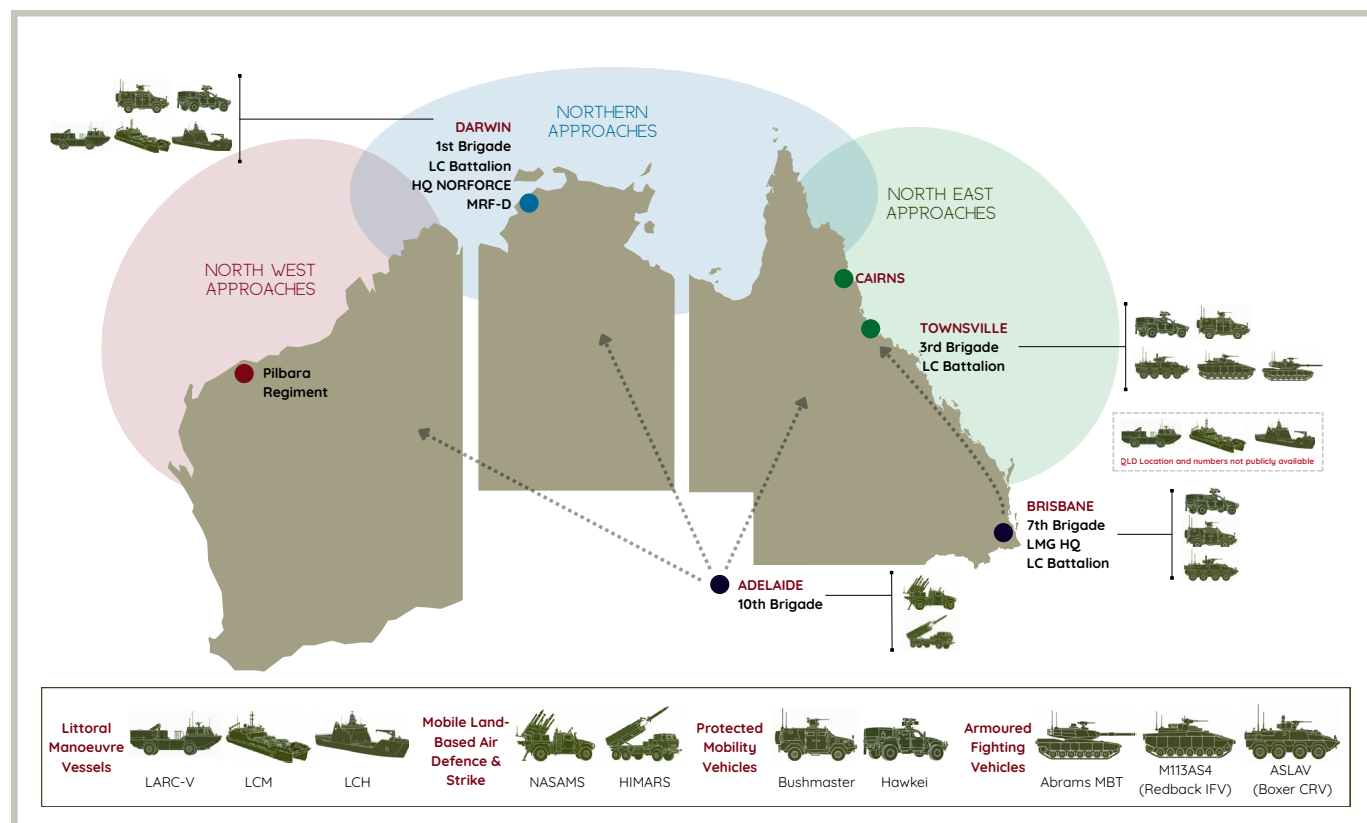
Brisbane sits outside the northern theatre but is directly coupled to it. Gallipoli Barracks hosts the LMG headquarters and 1st Landing Craft Battalion, together with motorised forces and strategic lift, while the Deployable Health Capability Support Centre at Bundamba stores, maintains and deploys the ADF's field hospitals and more than 550 medical modules. Command, health support and a third of the landing craft force are therefore generated well south of where they'll be employed. This means the movement of capability from Brisbane into the north is itself a theatre logistics requirement.

Where the northern system currently breaks

The preceding section describes Darwin, Townsville, northwestern Australia and Brisbane as complementary nodes. They aren't yet a system. The gap isn't simply infrastructure. While Defence is testing options for additional fixed and deployable logistics capacity, that doesn't resolve the underlying issues of overarching strategy, connectivity, ownership and tested readiness.

No published architecture. What's absent from the public record is a node-by-node northern theatre logistics architecture defining what each operating and supporting location must be capable of generating, moving, sustaining and regenerating, how those nodes connect, and what happens when a key route or facility is unavailable. Without it, each node is planned against its own

Figure 5: One system, multiple nodes



Source: ASPI.

investment case rather than against a theatre requirement, and no one can say whether the sum is sufficient.

No single owner. The capability spans multiple parts of Defence, other federal agencies, state and territory governments, commercial operators and allied forces. Each component has a sponsor. The system does not. Translating those responsibilities into a coherent theatre design requires clear ownership of node capacity, connectivity, resilience and readiness, which is the substance of a recommendation further in this report.

Connectivity runs primarily north–south, not east–west. Darwin is linked south along the Stuart Highway and the Darwin–Adelaide rail line, while Townsville is linked south to Brisbane. Alice Springs sits on the same north–south spine, but there’s no east–west rail connection across northern Australia. Lateral movement between Darwin and Townsville, more than 2,500 kilometres apart, remains dependent on a road corridor vulnerable to extreme weather. The emerging Central Queensland logistics node could add an eastern distribution point, but its value will depend on reliable connections to Townsville, Brisbane and the wider national network. ASPI has recommended designating the Adelaide–Darwin and Brisbane–Townsville corridors as defence-critical infrastructure and treating them as national defence arteries to play a formal role in shaping the resilience standards applied to the routes on which theatre movement depends.

Much of the depth still sits outside the principal northern operating nodes. Deep maintenance, replenishment and industrial capacity remain concentrated in the south and southeast, along with

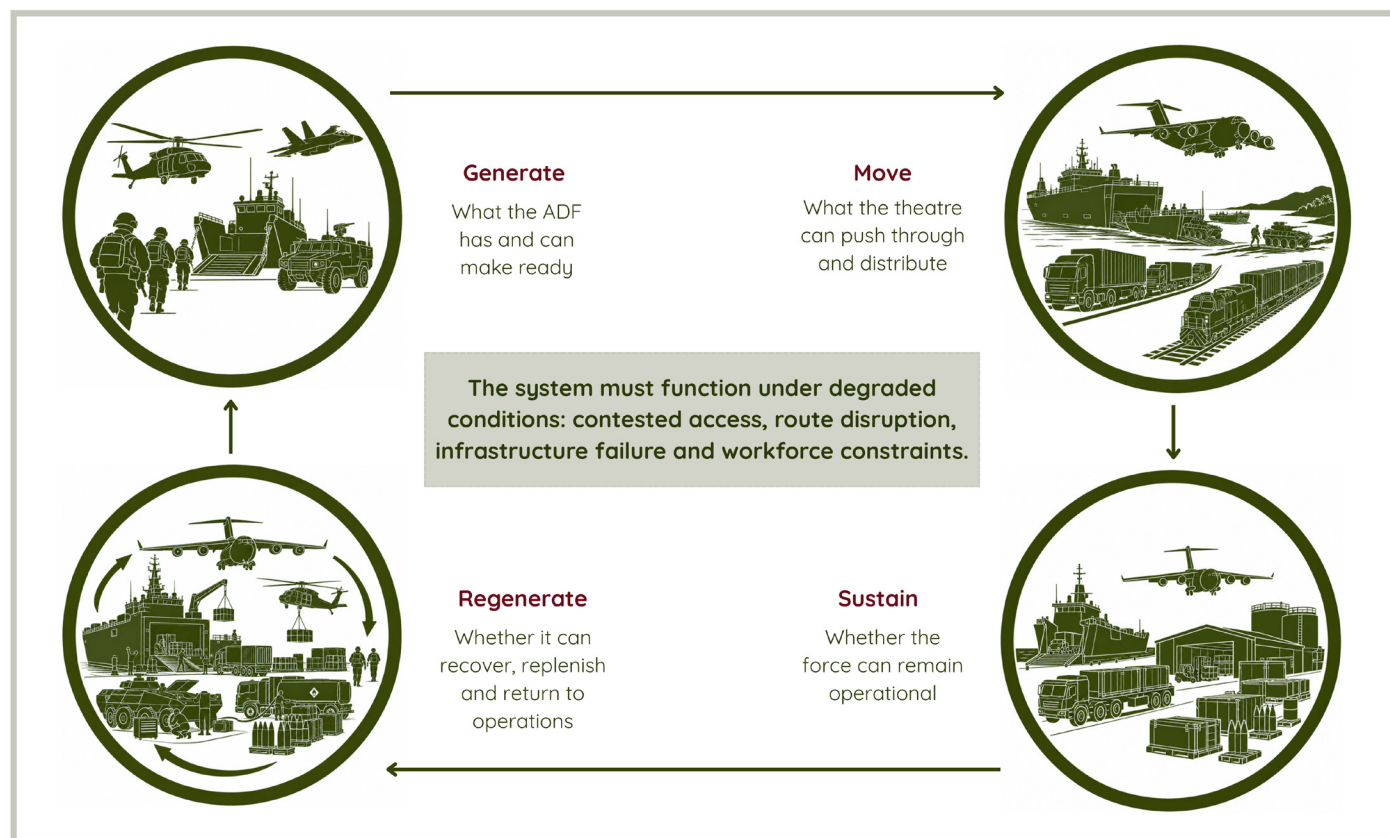
much of the Army’s national logistics and materiel system. New capabilities are also reinforcing this pattern, with the LMG headquarters and 1st Landing Craft Battalion based at Gallipoli Barracks in Brisbane. Defence is now testing additional fixed logistics capacity in Alice Springs and Central Queensland, but the functions, scale and connectivity of those nodes remain to be defined. Depth that can’t be moved forward under pressure is storage rather than endurance.

Industry can’t invest against an undefined requirement. Engineers, technicians, logistics specialists and skilled tradespeople determine whether infrastructure and contracts translate into usable sustainment capacity. The new market sounding signals potential demand for logistics capacity, but doesn’t yet define the functions, scale, throughput or long-term workload needed to support industry investment. Without a clear architecture and enduring demand signal, private investment in the workforce, facilities and equipment required for northern theatre logistics will remain constrained.

The system stops at the coastline. Littoral operations into the archipelago depend on access to ports, airfields and anchorages, and on the ability to contract and resupply locally. Australia’s growing defence cooperation with the US and other regional partners has a direct logistics dimension that’s rarely treated as such. Forward access isn’t an adjunct to littoral operations. It’s a precondition for sustaining them at operational range.

Allied integration is outpacing the architecture. MRF-D provides a persistent US presence in Darwin, while US force posture initiatives

Figure 6: Functions of the northern theatre logistics system



Source: ASPL.

are expanding logistics and sustainment cooperation. Yet there's no published architecture showing how Australian and allied requirements will integrate, share infrastructure and prioritise common resources such as workforce, maintenance, fuel and transport capacity.

Strategically, the issue is whether those nodes can function as mutually reinforcing components of a northern theatre logistics system, with supporting locations providing depth and distribution capacity, and the national and allied networks connecting them. This requires the system to generate, move, sustain and regenerate Australian and allied forces through competition, crisis and conflict. Infrastructure at individual nodes is necessary but doesn't demonstrate that the system can perform these functions when demand increases or critical routes and facilities are disrupted.

A system delivers outcomes; a network provides the connections that make them possible. The northern theatre logistics system should therefore be assessed by what it enables the force to do, rather than by the number of facilities established. Its effectiveness rests on four functions: generating forces and materiel, moving them where required, sustaining them in operation, and regenerating capability after use or disruption (Figure 6). Those functions must remain effective under degraded conditions, including contested access, route disruption, infrastructure failure and workforce constraints.

These functions are delivered through a distributed architecture, not a single logistics hub. Darwin, Townsville and northwestern Australia provide the principal northern operating nodes, while Brisbane, Alice Springs and Central Queensland may provide supporting depth, staging and distribution capacity. Their effectiveness depends on the connections between them and the wider national system. A node may have substantial capacity in isolation, but the system delivers operational endurance only when that capacity can be accessed, moved and combined across the network.

Critical dependencies

Northern theatre logistics depends on three different kinds of thing: resources that can be counted, enablers that make a node function, and hazards that must be designed around.

Fuel underwrites every other dependency and remains the north's most significant binding constraint. Australia imports most refined product and has no refining capacity in the north. Storage is visible, but distribution is the binding constraint. The NDS links theatre logistics to fuel resilience, requiring the system to be measured by its ability to receive, distribute and assure supply, not storage volume alone. JP 8190 Phase 1 is replacing and modernising the ADF's deployable bulk-fuel distribution capability, including storage, pumps, pipelines and ship-to-shore transfer. But deployable capability depends on the fixed network feeding it. The critical northern question is whether fuel landed

at Darwin can be received, stored, certified and pushed forward at operational tempo.³³

Forward access to **explosive ordnance** is fundamental to littoral operations, yet storage is constrained by safety, regulatory and separation requirements and can't be expanded wherever space allows. The question isn't how much stock is held nationally, but how fast it moves forward, and whether northern ports, airfields and transport networks can distribute it under pressure.

Commercial sealift remains a particular dependency. Landing craft solve the final movement from ship to shore but don't replace theatre-level movement of bulk equipment, fuel, ammunition and sustainment stocks. That requires naval shipping, commercial ports, coastal shipping, stevedoring and strategic sealift. In May 2025, Australia's Strategic Fleet Pilot signed its first vessel, the container ship ANL (Australian National Line) *Kokoda*; with two more planned to follow. That's a welcome step, but container capacity isn't sealift for a land force, which needs roll-on roll-off, heavy lift and breakbulk.

Power, water and communications are what make a node a node. The Northern Territory grid isn't connected to the national market. Port and airfield operations, fuel pumping, cold-chain and medical

facilities are all electrically dependent, and northern connectivity runs through a small number of terrestrial fibre routes. A port with stevedores, fuel and clearance is still closed if it has no power.

The **civilian workforce** is integral to the national and defence logistics system. It includes heavy-vehicle and dangerous-goods drivers, rail and intermodal operators, stevedores, marine crews and pilots, fuel terminal and refuelling staff, warehouse and freight personnel, aviation ground crews and maintenance trades. Across the north, Defence industry competes for resources, energy and construction from the same labour pool. Most sit inside commercial entities whose surge capacity Defence neither controls nor measures.

Environmental disruption is predictable rather than adversarial, and just as consequential. The wet season can close or restrict major roads, disrupt rail and constrain maritime operations, and cyclones can suspend port and airfield operations, often affecting fuel, ammunition, equipment and personnel movement simultaneously. Redundancy and alternative routing are essential.

Connecting Australian industry to regional sustainment

Case study: GenPower Services and Supacat Asia Pacific

An emerging partnership between Darwin-based GenPower Services and Supacat Asia Pacific illustrates one pathway to distributed sustainment capacity in northern Australia.

In April 2026, the companies announced a strategic partnership to expand engineering, maintenance and platform support across northern Australia and the Indo-Pacific. It combines GenPower's regional workforce, facilities and engineering capability with Supacat's specialist defence engineering, vehicle and through-life support expertise. Darwin was identified as a potential engineering base for supporting ADF, government and commercial customers.³⁴

The partnership shows how existing regional capability could connect to Australia's broader defence and allied sustainment system. International defence companies could use established Australian providers as entry points into northern Australia, while regional businesses gain access to specialist expertise, supply chains and customers. This aligns with the US Regional Sustainment Framework, which seeks to develop distributed maintenance and repair capacity closer to operational forces through military-industry and international partnerships.³⁵

Regional partnerships could add capacity outside major defence industrial centres and reduce the need to return equipment to southern facilities. However, this depends on sustained demand,

skilled workforces and the security, certification and contracting arrangements required for Defence and allied work. Allied primes also need mechanisms to engage regional suppliers rather than relying on established southern supply chains.

Workforce depth remains a constraint. Northern Australia has a limited pool of engineers, technicians and tradespeople, with strong competition from mining, energy and other industries. Regional maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) therefore needs a reliable pipeline of work and workforce development rather than short-term peaks from exercises or individual contracts.

The broader opportunity is to connect regional businesses with enduring Defence and allied requirements, creating a network that complements major defence and industrial facilities. Darwin, Townsville, northwestern Australia, Alice Springs and Central Queensland could draw on local engineering, maintenance, transport and logistics providers to increase repair, recovery and distribution capacity closer to dispersed forces.

Conclusion

Australia is building a force designed to operate in the littoral, but the logistics system supporting that force still rely heavily on concentrated southern depots, fixed infrastructure and long lines of communication. That reliance becomes more significant as the Army expands its littoral capabilities and prepares to operate across a geographically dispersed northern theatre.

Many of the components of a northern logistics system are now being put in place. They include new landing craft, upgrades to northern bases, ports, fuel and maintenance infrastructure, deployable logistics and health capabilities, regional industry and greater allied access. Defence is also testing the market for fixed logistics nodes in Alice Springs and Central Queensland.

The issue is therefore less about whether the components exist and more about how they connect, the capacity they're expected to provide and the dependencies that sit behind them. Much of the supporting capacity is outside Defence, including commercial ports, fuel infrastructure, roads, rail, shipping, stevedoring, heavy transport, engineering, warehousing and the civilian workforce.

Greater visibility of those requirements would allow governments and industry to better understand the role they're expected to play in the northern logistics system. It would also make it easier to identify where capacity is concentrated, where the system relies on commercial or civilian services, and where additional resilience or redundancy may be required.

Darwin, Townsville and northwestern Australia should function as complementary operating nodes within this wider network, supported by logistics depth in Brisbane, Alice Springs and Central Queensland. Their effectiveness will depend on the connections between them and on the civilian infrastructure and commercial capacity that allow the system to operate.

The focus should therefore be on understanding and strengthening the system Australia is already building. The objective isn't simply more infrastructure, but a northern logistics network with sufficient visibility, capacity and resilience to move, sustain and regenerate a dispersed force when normal routes, facilities or supply chains are under pressure.



Source: Defence image library, [online](#).

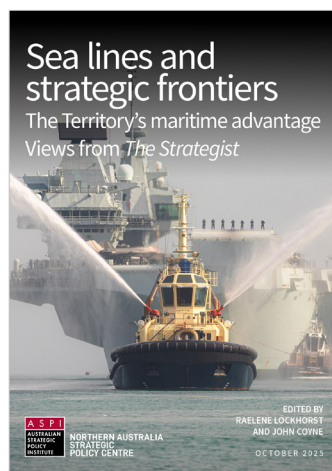
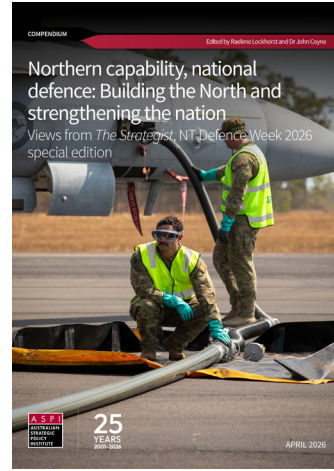
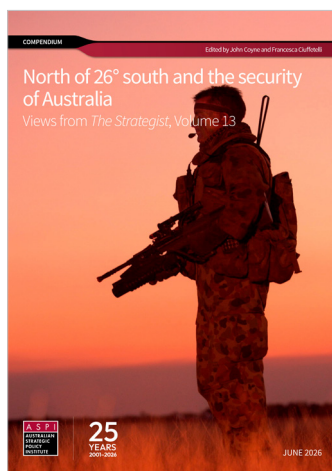
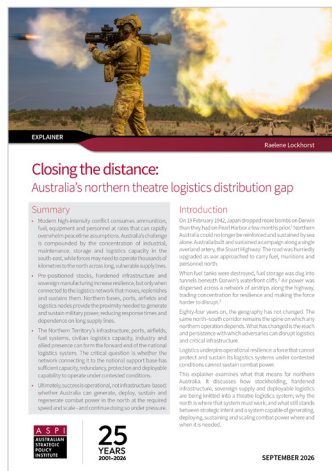
Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACNDS	Army's Contribution to the National Defence Strategy
ADF	Australian Defence Force
ANL	Australian National Line
AUSMIN	Australia – United States Ministerial Consultations
CRV	combat reconnaissance vehicle
DSTG	Defence Science and Technology Group
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
IFV	infantry fighting vehicle
JLC	Joint Logistics Command
LCH	landing craft heavy
LCM	landing craft medium
LMG	Littoral Manoeuvre Group
MRF-D	Marine Rotational Force – Darwin
MRO	maintenance, repair and overhaul
NASAMS	National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System
NDS	National Defence Strategy
RMC-N	Regional Maintenance Centre – North
US	United States
USFPI	United States Force Posture Initiative
USMC	United States Marine Corps

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