

# US to fly F-22 Raptors in and out of Australia amid South China Sea tensions

*The Sydney Morning Herald*

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The US will begin flying its deadliest fighter plane, the F-22 Raptor, out of northern Australia next year, the most senior American commander in the Pacific has revealed as he warned of a need to show strength to deter aggression in the region.

During a visit to Sydney on Wednesday, the commander of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, vowed the US would remain a major player in the region, saying its "enduring interests" would not "change on January 20th" - referring to the day of Donald Trump's inauguration as President.

Admiral Harris revealed that he had signed a 2017 agreement for Australia to host US military assets including the Raptors, which are feared and revered as the best fighter planes in the world, and will send a strong signal about US military presence in the region.

"I think that's positive," Admiral Harris told the Lowy Institute event.



*The F22 Raptor is the most advanced US fighter aircraft. Photo: US Air Force*

The greater presence of US air power out of Australia follows on from the rotation of US marines as a way to bolster the alliance and the American footprint at the southern edge of Asia - akin to a stationary aircraft carrier.

Strategic analysts widely see northern Australia as vital territory because it is mostly out of range of China's ballistic missiles and is at the fulcrum of the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Euan Graham, the Lowy Institute's director of international security, described the presence of the F-22s as "pretty high-end coercive signalling to China".

While the rotation of marines in Darwin got more attention, the stationing of planes was much more strategically significant, he said.



*The Commander of the United States Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, discussed the plan during a visit to Sydney. Photo: Brook Mitchell*

Admiral Harris said that the US and Australia were "exploring greater integration of fifth-generation fighter deployments to Australia". Both Raptors and the controversial F-35 Joint Strike Fighter are so-called fifth generation planes combining stealth with powerful sensors and weaponry, though the F-22 is regarded as a better plane.

Mr Trump, despite indicating he would expect allies to do more and insisting he would prioritise American needs, has vowed to build up the US military, particularly the navy.



*A Chinese base under construction in the South China Sea. Photo: New York Times*

Admiral Harris, who has been a hawkish voice during the Obama years - coining the famous phrase "Great Wall of Sand" to describe Beijing's artificial islands in the South China Sea - said along with North Korea and Islamist terrorism, the US and Australia faced "significant challenges . . . posed by a revanchist Russia and an increasingly assertive China".

Admiral Harris said there was "no room for subtlety" in convincing potential aggressors that their actions would be deterred and said that maintaining a "credible combat power" was vital, along with having the resolve to use it and signalling that resolve.

Admiral Harris, who met with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on Wednesday, described the current system of global rules that allow freedom of passage at sea as the "global operating system".

"I'll be blunt in saying that the global operating system that created the Indo-Asia-Pacific economic miracle is coming under pressure from revisionist powers," he said in an apparent reference to China and Russia.

Admiral Harris said he would like other countries such as Australia to carry out freedom-of-navigation operations - designed to challenge China's island-building in the South China Sea - but stressed it was up to them.

"Should others signal in this way in freedom-of-navigation operations? I think so, but it's up to each individual country to make that decision."

He played down Mr Trump's recent controversy over questioning the "One China policy" under which the US respects the country's sovereignty over Taiwan, saying that the One China policy was US policy and law.

"I'm completely comfortable working in that framework and I understand completely my obligations with regard to the law, the Taiwan Relations Act. Any future change to that is really speculative at best so I'm going to wait and see what happens in January."

And in remarks that pushed back against speculation that Mr Trump would be soft on Russia - particularly in light of newly named Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's history with Vladimir Putin - he said improved relations with Russia were fine provided the US was not backing down on core interests.

"The relationship we have with Russia is where it is today because of Russia's activities and their actions," he said. "Anything we can do to improve that is a positive as long as maintain steadfastness of our resolve with regard to the actions of Russia."