

**US foreign policy**

## US to 'deepen' defence ties with Australia in face of China threat

Top military officials and diplomats meet amid rising concern about potential conflict over Taiwan



US defence secretary Lloyd Austin met his Australian counterpart on Tuesday to discuss defence co-operation © Michael Reynolds/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

#### **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington YESTERDAY

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The Pentagon plans to deploy more fighter jets, bombers and other military assets to Australia, as the US enhances its alliance in the face of “dangerous and coercive” Chinese actions in the Indo-Pacific.

Defence secretary Lloyd Austin said the allies agreed to “deepen our defence co-operation” after a meeting in Washington on Tuesday with his Australian counterpart, Richard Marles. Australian foreign minister Penny Wong and US secretary of state Antony Blinken also took part in the meeting.

“We committed ourselves to concrete steps to deepen our co-operation in both diplomacy and defence,” Austin said. “China’s dangerous and coercive actions throughout the Indo-Pacific, including around Taiwan, and toward the Pacific Island countries and in the East and South China Seas, threaten regional peace and stability.”

It was the first time that the US and [Australian](#) foreign and defence ministers have met jointly since the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese took office earlier this year. It comes as the two countries and their partners in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly worried about the rising threat from China, particularly to Taiwan.

[Austin](#) said the US would increase “rotational” deployments, which involve sending military assets and personnel on recurring missions without relying on a permanent presence, as well as rotational deployments of other navy and army capabilities. He did not provide any numbers about specific deployments but said the two countries would work out the details at a later stage.

Charles Edel, an Australia expert at the CSIS think-tank, applauded the announcement but stressed that it was critical for the allies to follow through. Some critics have pointed out that Washington and Canberra talked about enhanced deployments a year ago but with few results.

“This is all welcome, but the proof is in the pudding and will really revolve around how quickly they bring some of these sizeable commitments online . . . [and] how quickly they can fold others into their efforts,” said Edel, who added that Australia was increasingly significant for how the US operates in the Indo-Pacific.

Edel said one of the most important aspects was the decision to “preposition munitions and fuel” in Australia, which he said would enhance deterrence.

Austin and Marles said the two countries would also invite Japan to work more with the allies in Australia. Marles said they would ask Japan to participate more in joint US-Australian exercises. Marles and Wong will travel to Tokyo later this week to discuss co-operation between Canberra and Tokyo in the Indo-Pacific.

Zack Cooper, an Asia security expert at the American Enterprise Institute, said stepping up rotational presences in Australia was critical given the dispersed geography in the region. US military leaders frequently talk about the “tyranny of distance”, which refers partly to the distance they would have to move assets in the case of a conflict with China.

“Australia is well positioned geographically, particularly for long-range aircraft such as bombers, surveillance aircraft, and refuelers, but it can also serve as a key training area for combined forces,” said Cooper.

He added that Japan would likely conduct more training and exercises with the US and Australia inside Australia after concluding a reciprocal access agreement with Canberra earlier this year.

The US has stepped up its relationship with Australia over the past couple of years, including resurrecting the Quad — a security group that comprises the US, Japan, *Australia and India*

Australia and India.

The US, UK and Australia also signed the Aukus pact last year, which is designed to enable Canberra to obtain nuclear-powered submarines, which are viewed as critical to help Australia work with the US to counter China.

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