

SAGE INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE BRIEF | NO. 014

BEYOND TAIWAN

Australian endurance and regional defence commitments

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Protecting the national support system belongs in the regional campaign plan from the outset.

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Suggested Citation

Bruni, J. (2026). Beyond Taiwan: Australian endurance and regional defence commitments. SAGE Strategic Intelligence Brief No. 014, 11 November 2026. SAGE International Australia.

Executive assessment

A Taiwan blockade or war could confront Australia with simultaneous demands to protect its own territory and infrastructure, sustain American operations and assist the Philippines.

These tasks would compete for aircraft, ships, intelligence, transport, repair capacity and skilled personnel.

Canberra should establish priorities and prepare reinforcement before a crisis forces those choices upon it. A limited initial contribution may be possible without general mobilisation.

For substantial commitments sustained through a prolonged, contested war, selective military reinforcement and wider national mobilisation are prudent planning assumptions. The required scale would depend on mission limits, duration, losses and access to supplies. Public information cannot establish when general mobilisation would become necessary.

The central argument builds on Sami Omari and John Bruni's Fire Base Australia, written for The Cipher Brief, 3 November 2026: access to Australian facilities has military value only while Australia can sustain their output.

Protecting military facilities and the civilian systems supporting them is therefore part of Australia's alliance contribution. It cannot be treated as whatever remains after forces deploy north. [13] This brief examines a scenario in which the United States provides the largest external military contribution around Taiwan and Australia considers focused assistance to the Philippines.

It is a planning hypothesis, not an agreed division of responsibilities. Taiwan retains responsibility for its own defence; American intervention and Australian deployment require national decisions.

Four priorities follow: agree a sustainable division of effort with partners; match assistance to Philippine needs and Australian capacity; prepare graduated mobilisation; and exercise the decisions under simultaneous pressure. SAGE's Threshold Conditioning Assessment Mechanism (TCAM™) could help test how repeated pressure erodes available choices. Its usefulness should be demonstrated within existing processes, rather than assumed.

Research basis

Research leads came from the SAGE Intelligence Desk hosted by The Defense Brief (Canada), captured on 10 November 2026. The Desk is credited as a discovery source; underlying reporting and official documents supply the evidence. This brief develops the Fire Base Australia argument through SAGE's own scenarios and planning judgements. Source limits are consolidated in the method note. [1,13]

1. AUSTRALIAN ENDURANCE IS THE STARTING POINT

The practical question is how much Australia can sustain at home while supporting operations farther north.

A force sent to assist Manila may draw on the same surveillance aircraft, transport, maintenance teams or supplies needed to protect Australian approaches and support American operations. The value of a deployment must therefore include what it prevents Australia from doing elsewhere.

Fire Base Australia identifies three connected demands: US operations from Australia, Australian combat contributions and homeland defence. It also distinguishes military facilities from the civilian services and national capacity that keep them functioning.

A usable base depends on ongoing supplies, repairs, transport, and key services; damage or disruption beyond its perimeter can reduce its military output. [13]

This changes the meaning of burden sharing.

Keeping Australian operating capacity available can enable allied operations around Taiwan.

Assistance to the Philippines can help preserve regional access and Manila’s freedom of action.

Both may benefit ‘the coalition’, but their demands are not automatically compatible. Canberra and Washington need an agreed account of the resources each consumes and the protection each requires. Existing US force-posture initiatives include Marine rotations, enhanced cooperation across military domains and combined logistics.

The Australian Department of Defence identifies upgrades at Darwin and Tindal and work at other northern locations. These arrangements provide a foundation for cooperation; they do not establish an unlimited wartime mission or a complete public allocation of protection responsibilities. [14] Western Australia requires a clear distinction between current and future capability.

Defence’s October 2026 statement describes visiting-submarine maintenance at HMAS Stirling as preparation for Submarine Rotational Force–West, with the first rotation planned for late 2027. Current access, future rotations and an Australian-owned nuclear-submarine fleet are different capabilities. Planning must use what is available in the scenario being examined. [15]

Nor should the American presence be counted twice.

US forces assigned to operations farther north cannot also be assumed available to protect their Australian support locations.

The same discipline applies to Australian units and specialist civilian workers. Announced investment does not resolve an immediate shortage of trained people, functioning equipment or replacement stocks. The planning task is to identify which Australian functions must continue, what allied support is assumed, and which commitments would be reduced if that support failed.

Protecting the national support system belongs in the regional campaign plan from the outset.

2. REGIONAL COMMITMENTS REQUIRE SOVEREIGN CHOICES

The Philippines has its own citizens, maritime concerns and political choices to protect.

Australian assistance should begin with a Philippine-defined need, rather than an assumption that Manila is principally a platform for a Taiwan campaign. Diplomatic restraint and resistance to maritime coercion can coexist; reporting on Manila's softer rhetoric toward China should not be equated with a surrender of its interests. [4]

Australia's strategic partnership, Status of Visiting Forces Agreement and defence cooperation provide channels for preparation. The August 2026 ministerial statement identifies closer surveillance cooperation and access arrangements among practical enablers. These are not an Australian–Philippine mutual-defence guarantee equivalent to ANZUS, nor blanket permission for future combat operations. Assistance requires Australian authority and appropriate Philippine consent. [6,7,16]

Washington retains its own Philippine commitments.

The 2023 US–Philippine defence guidelines connect armed attacks on specified forces, aircraft and public vessels, including coast guards, in the South China Sea to mutual defence commitments. A Taiwan crisis would not automatically transfer responsibility for Philippine security to Canberra. [8]

ANZUS supplies a separate framework.

Article III provides for consultation when a party's security is threatened in the Pacific. Articles IV and V concern action to meet common danger following relevant armed attacks, through constitutional processes. The treaty does not prescribe an ADF deployment or automatically commit Australia to every US operation concerning Taiwan. Attacks on US forces north of Darwin could engage these questions; the circumstances and national decisions would determine the response. [17]

Contingency	Decision Canberra must make
Blockade and attempted relief	Define whether assistance involves diplomacy, economic measures, support to shipping or combat to break restrictions.
Invasion and Taiwanese resistance	Reassess US support from Australia alongside homeland protection and assistance to Manila.
Occupation and continuing resistance	Set the purpose and endurance of continuing support; do not assume demands end with the initial campaign.
Attack on Australia or relevant US forces	Assess applicable commitments and immediate protection needs through sovereign decision processes.

3. SIMULTANEOUS PRESSURE CAN NARROW AUSTRALIAN CHOICES

Reporting identified through The Defense Brief points to a useful planning problem.

Reuters reported Taiwan's assessment of Chinese area-denial drills in the Western Pacific; the War on the Rocks programme summary highlights constraints between munitions spending and actual production. Together they justify testing simultaneous operational pressure and difficult replenishment. They do not establish an imminent campaign or a Chinese decision to attack. [1,2,5]

Pressure against the Philippines could divert allied attention, disrupt access relevant to Taiwan or secure an independent Chinese gain. These purposes could overlap. Describing an operation as a feint would not reduce its consequences for Manila. An excessive response could divert scarce forces; an inadequate one could permit lasting restrictions on Philippine activity. The decision must turn on the interests at risk and the resources needed to protect them.

Australia could face a related problem closer to home.

In February 2025, Defence confirmed a three-vessel PLA Navy group in Australia's approaches and monitored it with air and maritime capabilities.

This establishes an example of presence and monitoring demands, not proof of a conditioning campaign.

Defence also affirmed freedom of navigation under international law. [18] This was despite a PLAN live-fire exercise in the Tasman Sea, which forced the temporary diversion of flights between Australia and New Zealand. The Tasman Sea episode went beyond naval presence: short-notice live-fire warnings prompted 49 commercial flights to alter their routes on 21 February 2025, with precautionary rerouting continuing through the weekend. A review of publicly available reporting for this brief identified no comparable instance of Western freedom-of-navigation operations near Taiwan or in the South China Sea causing short-notice rerouting of Chinese civilian flights. The relevant distinction is the disruption imposed on civilian traffic, rather than the nationality of the vessels exercising navigational rights.

Although the financial cost was not publicly quantified, the incident demonstrated how military activity could disrupt civilian connectivity and impose immediate operational burdens on airlines and air-traffic authorities without an armed confrontation.

During a Taiwan crisis, repeated appearances by a small Chinese flotilla could consume surveillance time, disrupt maintenance or training schedules, and increase pressure to retain forces near Australia.

A comparatively small deployment might thereby affect the allocation of much larger Australian resources.

This is a scenario to test against observed costs, not an established finding about Chinese intent.

The threshold conditioning question

Threshold Conditioning™ concerns deliberate, cumulative manipulation of the thresholds controlling an opponent's decisions and responses, progressively reducing its freedom of action.

The definition developed in SIB #013 focuses on what becomes harder to do after repeated pressure. It overlaps with established hybrid-threat analysis. [11]

The useful questions are concrete: Are comparable maritime activities taking longer? Are repair backlogs increasing? Are monitoring demands displacing other missions? Is the time available for useful decisions shrinking? TCAM should assess these changes against a baseline, then separately test whether credible evidence shows deliberate conditioning.

Lawful proximity alone is not aggression.

Territorial waters, an exclusive economic zone and international waters have different legal significance.

Likewise, a coincident service failure may intensify a crisis without being part of a hostile campaign. Australia's November cyber-resilience announcement illustrates the importance of assessing failures on their own facts; it supplies no evidence of Chinese involvement in this scenario. [12,18]

The objective is a sustainable response to demonstrated consequences. Australia must protect essential functions while preventing unnecessary exhaustion through its own response choices.

4. ASSISTANCE MUST FIT AVAILABLE CAPACITY

An Australian security contribution to the Republic of the Philippines should preserve a function Manila values, at a cost Canberra can sustain.

It should also improve the coalition's position after accounting for any additional US intelligence, protection or replenishment it requires.

A visible deployment that consumes more scarce allied support than it releases may simply move the burden.

The following functions serve as a basis for assessment. They are not a proposed force package: available units, readiness and classified tasking cannot be established from the sources used here.

Possible contribution	Purpose	Principal constraint
Surveillance and intelligence	Improve shared understanding of maritime activity.	Competing collection tasks, analysis and release permissions.
Logistics and maintenance	Sustain agreed Philippine and partner functions.	Transport, stocks, repair skills and host support.

Possible contribution	Purpose	Principal constraint
Communications and cyber resilience	Keep essential coordination functioning.	Provider dependence, access and recovery arrangements.
Liaison and exercises	Clarify requests, authority and responsibilities.	Staff availability and information protection.
Maritime presence or escort	Support an authorised protective mission.	Force protection, endurance, rules of engagement and escalation.

Information and logistics support can have direct operational consequences. Escort or combat missions demand an explicit assessment of purpose, authority, protection and sustainment. A wartime role cannot be inferred from a peacetime cooperation arrangement.

Each option should be tested against three practical questions.

What does it preserve for the Philippines? What does it prevent Australia from doing elsewhere? How long can it continue if supplies or allied assistance are reduced? The answers should identify the limiting functions, rather than rely on aggregate force size or future procurement promises.

Consent and diplomacy remain part of that assessment.

Canberra and Manila should agree on the purpose, limits, and public explanation of assistance, including when it would change or end. If US intervention is delayed, Philippine consent narrows, or coercion becomes armed attack, the proposed assistance package must be reconsidered.

This approach supports a focused contribution while keeping its national cost visible. It also prevents protection of Australian facilities and essential civilian services from becoming an unexamined residual task.

5. PREPARE MOBILISATION BEFORE COMMITMENTS EXPAND

Could the ADF meet these demands without general mobilisation?

A limited, short commitment may be feasible. For substantial US support, Philippine assistance and homeland protection sustained through prolonged disruption, Canberra should plan for selective military reinforcement and wider national mobilisation, or accept narrower missions.

That is a planning judgement about competing demands, not a claim that general mobilisation is inevitable.

The September 2026 workforce release reports more than 61,000 permanent ADF members as at 1 July, with Gap Year participants and full-time reservists included in a broader full-time headcount of more than 64,000.

These categories do not measure deployable combat strength.

Trained availability by trade, rotation depth, equipment readiness and access to supplies determine what the force can sustain. [19]

The 2026 National Defence Strategy calls for national preparedness and greater self-reliance, including when allied support is limited. That direction reinforces the need to test Australian endurance; it does not establish that the required capacity is already available. [20]

Degree of effort	What it provides and where it falls short
Standing-force surge	Reprioritises available personnel and equipment for bounded missions; cannot sustain an indefinite increase in demand.
Selective military mobilisation	Adds targeted Reserve reinforcement, retention and training measures; requires suitable skills, equipment and integration.
Wider national mobilisation	Coordinates industrial, transport, repair, health and essential-service capacity beyond Defence.
General mobilisation	Broad national expansion and reallocation for major sustained war. Here it is an analytical category, not a single statutory trigger or automatic conscription.

Defence’s enlarged contingent Reserve arrangements provide a potential reinforcement pool.

However, former service alone does not make a person immediately deployable: fitness, current skills, equipment and integration still matter. Recalling technicians or clinicians can also reduce the civilian capacity in the general workforce on which Defence depends. [21]

More personnel do not rapidly produce ships, aircraft, specialist maintainers or munitions.

Mobilisation planning must identify the bottlenecks, the time needed to relieve them and the civilian functions that must be protected.

Before commitments expand, ministers need to know which mission would first become unsustainable and what would stop if reinforcement or replenishment failed.

The prudent assumption is therefore graduated preparation. The breadth of mobilisation must follow the demands of the conflict and the missions Canberra chooses to sustain. General mobilisation is a contingency to prepare for, rather than a conclusion that public evidence can establish in advance.

6. FOUR PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

Agree a sustainable division of effort

Defence, under government direction and in consultation with Washington, should assess homeland protection, support to US operations and assistance to Manila together. Identify the capabilities each task consumes, the allied support assumed and the missions to reduce if those assumptions fail. Count each force and support function once.

Match Philippine requests to Australian capacity

Defence and DFAT should work with Philippine counterparts to define the functions Manila wants to preserve, the assistance it would accept and the decisions it retains. Test the net allied benefit of each contribution, including Australian dependence on US protection and supplies. Consult Japan where its capacities and arrangements are relevant.

Prepare graduated national mobilisation

The Australian Government should coordinate Defence, relevant civilian agencies, state and territory governments and essential-service operators around likely capacity constraints. Prepare selective reinforcement, industrial and repair support, and civilian workforce protection. Set indicators to expand support or narrow missions before resources are exhausted.

Exercise the difficult allocation decisions

Defence should propose an exercise through existing, mutually agreed partner arrangements that combines a Taiwan contingency, Philippine requests and pressure on Australia. Test delayed US support, contested replenishment, changing consent and prolonged resistance after an invasion. TCAM may be trialled alongside existing assessment methods; retain it only if it clearly enhances decisions. Annex A provides the design.

Conclusion

Australia’s contribution to regional defence depends on a functioning national support system. Protecting that system is an alliance contribution, not simply a competing domestic task. Assistance to the Philippines and support for American operations must be planned against the same finite Australian capacity.

A small Chinese flotilla could impose disproportionate monitoring demands, particularly during an overseas crisis. The consequential question is whether repeated pressure reduces Australia’s practical choices and whether its response can be sustained. Presence by itself does not establish hostile intent.

For prolonged concurrent commitments, selective military reinforcement and wider national mobilisation are prudent planning assumptions. Canberra should prepare those options now, establish what each mission would cost, and preserve the authority to limit commitments when capacity cannot meet demand.

ANNEX A TESTING DECISIONS UNDER SIMULTANEOUS PRESSURE

SAGE proposes a time-limited trial within an existing, mutually approved Australian–Philippine workshop or exercise, with US and Japanese participation where agreed.

First, establish whether current processes already provide the intended assessment. No new headquarters or standing committee is proposed.

The fictional scenario combines a Taiwan blockade or invasion, pressure on Philippine maritime activity and a small PLA Navy group approaching Australia.

US forces request increased support from Australian facilities as Manila seeks assistance.

Supply and communications disruptions constrain the response. Branches should include prolonged Taiwanese resistance, reduced allied protection and a confirmed accidental outage.

Exercise development	Decision to test
Concurrent Taiwan and Philippine pressure	Assess local consequences without prematurely declaring a diversion.
Philippine assistance request	Match the request to consent, Australian authority and sustainable capacity.
PLA Navy group approaches Australia	Choose proportionate monitoring; measure displaced tasks and readiness costs.
Repair and transport demand rises	Allocate capacity among homeland protection, US support, Philippine assistance and civilian needs.
US support is delayed or consent changes	Narrow, defer or revise the assistance package.
An outage proves accidental, or the flotilla departs	Correct the assessment and adjust the response to the evidence.
The campaign outlasts initial resources	Select mobilisation measures or mission limits, allowing time for implementation.

Evaluate against existing practice

Compare equivalent scenarios using the ordinary briefing process and TCAM.

Assess speed to a useful decision, accuracy regarding consequences, false attribution, clarity of responsibility, feasible options and staff burden.

Record staff time and additional costs before claiming budget neutrality.

Discontinue or incorporate the trial if it duplicates existing work or fails to improve decisions.

ANNEX B ASSESSMENT RECORD AND EVIDENCE LIMITS

The Threshold Conditioning Assessment Mechanism is a proposed SAGE decision-support method, not an endorsed government procedure. Use a short record that makes the following information explicit. [11]

Field	Required assessment
Pattern	Period, baseline, related observations and alternative explanations.
Effects	Function affected, observed deterioration and consequence for the ability to act.
Confidence	Separate confidence in the effect, attribution, hostile intent and feasibility of assistance.
Trajectory	Likely direction, time remaining for a useful decision and evidence that would change the judgement.
Options and responsibility	Feasible response, required consent, responsible authority, cost and displaced tasks.
Endurance	Australian base and civilian continuity, supply access, allied dependence and mobilisation lead times.
Review	Next review, changed evidence and conditions for altering or ending the response.

Methodology and analytical limits

The Defense Brief’s SAGE Intelligence Desk supplied research leads. Its automated summaries are not independent corroboration, and repeated reporting of one source is not multiple confirmation. Reuters is used for attributed Taiwanese assessments; the Lowy and SCMP items supply commentary and reported interpretation. The War on the Rocks citation supports discussion of production constraints employing its published programme summary, not an independently verified wartime inventory. [1–5]

The brief separates documented arrangements from hypothetical operations and SAGE’s recommendations. Official declarations establish stated policy, arrangements or reported activity; they do not reveal classified readiness, stock levels or wartime protection plans. Assessing mobilisation depends on substantial, prolonged, and contested commitments. Exact endurance and the threshold for general mobilisation cannot be established here.

Threshold Conditioning requires more than repeated incidents. Assess strategic pattern, exploitation of response thresholds, cumulative loss of options and credible evidence of hostile intent separately. Control for weather, maintenance, improved detection, commercial decisions and accidents. Protective action can be justified by verified harm even while attribution remains unresolved; public accusations and military responses require their own assessments.

The trial should fail if it forces unrelated incidents into a campaign narrative, overlooks verified harm because intent is uncertain, conceals reliance on US support or treats Philippine agreement as a formality.

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