

Rules for US troops in NT kept secret

Date November 11, 2012

[Dylan Welch](#)

National Security Correspondent

[View more articles from Dylan Welch](#)

[Follow Dylan on Twitter](#) [Email Dylan](#)

Robert Gates (left) and Stephen Smith signed the document in 2010. *Photo: Angela Wylie*

A SECRET document that the government said did not exist and which outlines the rights, role and responsibilities of US forces in Australia is being kept from the public, due to concerns it would affect the relationship with America.

The document, classified "Secret" and signed in 2010 by the then US defence secretary, Robert Gates, and Australia's Defence Minister, Stephen Smith, is the only document created since 1963 that provides some official guidance for US troops in Australia. That includes the permanent rotational placement of what will be, by 2016, 2500 US marines in the Northern Territory. Their presence in Australia is also to be at the centre of discussions in Perth next week between senior US and Australian politicians.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta, will spend three days discussing the alliance with Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr, and Mr Smith. The US wants to rotate more soldiers, planes and possibly warships through Australia as a result of their highly public "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific, which comes at the end of a decade of costly land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I think it's untenable that the government would embark on something like this without letting Australians know about the arrangements that will underpin the US presence here," said Senator Scott Ludlam, of the Greens, a vocal critic of the plan. He was also critical of the decision not to release the document. "Maybe this is how it works in the US, but I think Australians have a right to know the terms," he said.

The secret document is called the Australia-United States Force Posture Review Working Group Statement of Principles, and is thought to be a set of broad guidelines for the recently expanded role of US troops in Australia. Earlier this year Fairfax Media asked Defence officials what legislation governed the presence of US marines in Darwin, and was told that the only document of relevance was the 50-year-old Status of US Forces in Australia Agreement, signed in 1963.

But during a Freedom of Information application administered by the head of the Defence department's international policy division, Andrew Craig, the other document was uncovered. It is described in a letter from the Defence department regarding the FOI application as a "statement of principles relating to Australian and US military collaboration". The Defence department was obliged to consult the US government regarding the request for access to the document, which was ultimately refused because it could damage Australia's "international relations".

In deciding to refuse access, Mr Craig took into account US response "to formal consultation". That likely means the US objected to the document's release. "Disclosure of the document at this time could diminish the positive working relationships between the Australian and US governments," the decision letter states. When asked why they did not reveal the document's existence when asked by Fairfax earlier this year a Defence spokeswoman said: "The 2010 statement of principles that was agreed to guide working group discussions on options for co-operation on the US force posture review and does not govern the rotational US Marine Corps deployments announced in November 2011."

The spokeswoman denied the accusation that Defence and the government were favouring the US alliance over the right of the Australian public to be fully informed about the US troop presence here.

"Our alliance with the United States remains our most important defence and security relationship and is an integral element of our strategic posture," she said.