

In midst of tensions over missile plan

US Defence Secretary Cohen demands Australia boost its military

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In an unusually blunt intervention, US Defence Secretary William Cohen flew into Australia from China last weekend and publicly urged the Howard government to lift military spending to ensure that its forces were ready for future joint missions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Speaking on Australian television during a three-day visit, Cohen declared: "There will have to be additional investment if Australia hopes to maintain a modern interoperable force with the United States and other allies. That's something that's very important for maintaining stability in the entire region."

Making his third trip to Australia in recent years, Cohen intensified the pressure on Australian ruling circles to resolve their dilemma over the country's longstanding military reliance on the US, on the one hand, and their dependence on Asian export markets, including the large and growing Chinese economy, on the other.

Cohen described Australia as a "key anchor" of stability in the Asia-Pacific. The US "treasured" the "very strong bilateral relationship," he stressed. He denied, however, that Australia served as a US "deputy" in the region, a term used by Australian Prime Minister John Howard last year during preparations for the deployment of troops to East Timor.

While paying lip service to Australia having its "own foreign policy", Cohen made it clear that the US would expect Australian assistance in the event of conflict between the US and China over Taiwan.

Asked how Australia should respond in the event of a confrontation across the Taiwan Straits, Cohen noted that Australia had been "side-by-side" with the US in every previous conflict. "We would look to Australia in any type of conflict ... for their partnership and share in the responsibility of providing peace and security throughout the Asia-Pacific region."

Cohen heightened tensions with China by raising the prospect of joint US-Australian bases, including the Pine Gap satellite station, playing a key role in the mooted US National Missile Defence (NMD) plans to intercept hostile missiles. "Australia plays an important role in early warning and we would expect and hope that would continue in the future," he said.

China, together with Russia, has raised strenuous objections to the revival of the Reagan administration's "star wars" project. While the White House maintains that the missile plan would only target small "countries of concern" such as North Korea, Iraq and Iran, the more obvious thrust is toward other nuclear powers, particularly China and Russia. The United States' NATO allies in Europe have also criticised the NMD proposal, fearing that it will disrupt their political and commercial relations with Russia and China.

Cohen said US President Clinton had still to decide on the NMD project but he signalled that if the US did proceed it would invite selected allies to participate in building the missile network. "Theatre missile defence would certainly be available to friends and allies who want to share in the program," he said. Asked if Australia might be included, he replied, "Absolutely."

Cohen's remarks were all the more provocative, given that he had just held talks in Beijing. The purpose of his visit was to formally renew military cooperation with China, which was broken off after the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia last year. While Cohen claimed that his talks in Beijing were amicable, he turned a deaf ear to the Chinese regime's objections to the NMD scheme.

In the wake of Cohen's tour, China and Russia issued a sharp joint statement on July 18, warning that if the NMD plan went ahead it would "trigger a new arms race". A

one-day summit between Chinese President Jian Zemin and his visiting Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, produced a joint communiqué that accused the US of seeking “unilateral military and security advantages”.

“Implementing this plan will have the most grave adverse consequences not only for the security of Russia, China and other countries, but also for the security of the United States and global strategic stability... Therefore, China and Russia are firmly opposed to such a system.”

While in Australia, Cohen indicated that the Clinton administration wants Canberra to take the lead in regional military and diplomatic interventions, as it did in East Timor. He said Australia faced “pockets of instability” in the Asia-Pacific. He praised the Australian role in Timor and said the US would be guided by the Howard government in imposing sanctions on Fiji and in responding to the communal fighting in Indonesian Maluku.

Thus, while avoiding the tag of US “deputy”—for which Howard was roundly castigated by various Asian governments—Washington is insistently urging that the Australian political and military establishment act as a policeman in the increasingly volatile region.

Cohen issued a thinly veiled threat to cut off Australian access to new American weapons systems. He remarked that both Democrats and Republicans in the US were concerned about a decline in military spending in Australia and the growing “technology gap” between US and Australian forces. At the same time, he sought to demonstrate the benefits of US largesse by initialing a preliminary, non-binding agreement offering to share aspects of US military technology.

The Australian military relies heavily on the US for access to sophisticated weaponry. A defence discussion paper released last month noted that in replacing the air force's 71 ageing F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets, acquiring new guided missile frigates for the navy and upgrading poorly-functioning submarines, the equipment will have to be US compatible.

Cohen said he was pleased that the defence Green Paper, launched last month by Howard and Defence Minister John Moore, called for increased military spending. Speaking at the release of *Defence Review 2000—Our Future Defence Force* on June 27, Howard had insisted that “defence will need to bulk larger than it has over the past few years”.

Besides promoting an increase in the \$13 billion a year defence budget, the Green Paper advocates a fundamental shift in the military's role. It outlines a new regional

doctrine, based on the active assertion of Australian strategic and commercial interests. “What is clear is that Australia's security is closely tied to the stability and well-being of our broader region,” it states.

There are open divisions in ruling circles, however, over the advisability of being too closely associated with the Pentagon. The day after Cohen left the country, former Liberal Party prime minister Malcolm Fraser urged the Howard government not to support the proposed NMD missile shield.

If Australia contributed to the project, it could jeopardise the country's security, he said. “The needs and desires of the United States do not necessarily conform with what is necessary for the security and integrity of Australia.”

The concerns of Fraser and other critics of Howard centre on the response in Beijing and other Asian capitals to such intimate involvement in the strengthening of the US military. A number of Asian governments last year bitterly questioned Canberra's motives in spearheading the Timor force, particularly after Howard's “deputy” remark.

The Howard government's *Defence Review* itself casts doubt on the US alliance. “What would happen if the US was deeply committed elsewhere when we needed support?” it asks. “Will our interests and perceptions match those of the US closely enough for us to depend more heavily upon them? Finally, we would need to consider our sense of ourselves as a nation, and how others' perceptions of us might be changed by a decision to rely more on the US. And we need to consider what the US expects of us in return.”

Echoing these concerns, the Labor Party opposition has warned against hosting NMD facilities. At the same time, the Labor leaders have pledged bipartisan backing for boosting the military's capacity and role. Labor leader Kim Beazley and defence spokesman Arch Bevis both immediately welcomed the *Defence Review*.



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