

Australian government joins Bush's "missile defence" system

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Despite sharp opposition expressed by European and Asia-Pacific powers, including Russia, China, Indonesia and New Zealand, the Australian government ended 2003 by formally committing itself to joining the Bush administration's so-called missile defence system. Coming in the wake of its participation in the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq, the decision is another turning point in the Howard government's unconditional alignment with Washington.

The announcement was made on December 4, following a meeting in the US capital between Defence Minister Robert Hill and US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a strong advocate of the system. Unveiling the decision, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer linked it directly to intensifying overall military ties to Washington. "Our long and vigorous alliance with the United States benefits the security of both countries and will be strengthened by our participation in missile defence," he said.

To underscore its heightened commitment to the US alliance, the government has also joined the US Joint Strike Fighter program to develop an advanced stealth fighter-bomber, pledging at least \$204 million toward the project. In addition, it has agreed, along with 14 other governments, to take part in a new series of six US-led weapons interception exercises during the first half of 2004. The US, Italy, France, Germany and Poland will host the provocative exercises, aimed in the first instance against North Korea and Iran.

Absolutely no details, financial or otherwise, have been revealed about the planned Australian role in the National Missile Defence (NMD). Both Downer and Prime Minister John Howard have denied that it will involve the stationing of missiles on Australian soil. However, they have apparently committed themselves to purchasing warships fitted with the US Aegis combat

system, which can supposedly be upgraded to knock out incoming missiles.

Other mooted Australian contributions include the use of the US-Australia satellite surveillance station at Pine Gap in central Australia, whose location makes Australia geographically vital for the intended global scope of the system. There may be also some peripheral use of Australian over-the-horizon radar and communications technology.

Some of the vagueness of the announcement is no doubt due to the uncertainties surrounding the Pentagon's scheme. The Bush administration has earmarked \$US50 billion over five years to build a system with an initial, rudimentary capacity to shoot down warheads by next September. Still under development, the system could include a combination of early interceptor rockets, high-powered lasers and ship-based anti-missile rockets.

Billion dollar contracts have been awarded to Raytheon, TRW and other giant US corporations to develop these weapons, yet none of them has been proven reliable. In fact, one of the main armaments, the PAC-3 missile, is a revamped version of the Patriot missile that failed to shoot down a single Scud rocket during the 1990-91 Gulf War.

The NMD is the successor to the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative, dubbed "Star Wars". Designed to render nuclear weapons obsolete, notably Soviet and Chinese strategic missiles, it was a spectacular failure that wasted \$69 billion before it was finally abandoned. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1991 Gulf War, the dream of absolute military global superiority was revived under the Clinton administration, which provisionally approved and began testing the NMD in 1996.

The Bush administration not only gave the final go

ahead for the NMD, it accelerated and vastly expanded the project, making it a top Pentagon priority. Whatever doubts surround the technologies involved, there is no doubt about the White House's intent. The only purpose of the project is to increase the ability of the United States and its selected allies to outgun, bully and intimidate their rivals with impunity.

While Downer and Howard sought to justify their decision by claiming that the system will be purely defensive, it is designed to be a vital component of an increasingly aggressive military policy.

Regardless of the unknown details and costs, the Howard government was anxious to sign up for the system as soon as possible, irrespective of the regional reaction. Downer lamely declared that no South East Asian countries would be targetted. Without any explanation, he spoke of stopping "rogue states" or terrorist organisations developing ballistic missiles.

The decision provoked criticism from neighbouring Indonesia, whose Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda warned of triggering an arms race that could "undermine regional security and stability". He predicted that any states that had intercontinental missiles would upgrade their armaments to evade the US capability. He also poured scorn on the notion that the NMD would prevent the proliferation of alleged "weapons of mass destruction," pointing out that no such weapons had been unearthed in Iraq.

China condemned the Australian decision and stepped up its protests on December 19, when Japan unveiled a double decision to send troops to Iraq and to spend as much as 9.3 trillion yen (\$US1 trillion) over four years to buy the NMD system. China's Defence Minister Cao Gangchuan told his Japanese counterpart Shigeru Ishiba that the NMD would disrupt the "strategic balance" in the world and promote an arms race.

The Australian decision also flew in the face of opposition from Russia and France, as well as New Zealand, which has its own military partnership with Australia. In a caustic editorial, the New Zealand *Dominion Post* pointed out that the NMD would not have saved a single life on September 11, 2001. It declared: "Canberra's decision to sign up for the untried missile defence shield project seems explicable only in the context of other strategic decisions taken by the Australian government, which increasingly mirrors

the US in defence and foreign policy positions. Where Washington goes, Canberra goes, whether that place is Iraq or outer space."

Howard has long been a vehement defender of the NMD project. He strongly mooted Australian involvement at the end of February but withheld public confirmation in the face of massive protests against the looming Iraq war.

The formal announcement confirms the fundamental shift in strategic and economic calculations ushered in by the eruption of US militarism in Iraq. Howard and his ministers have unequivocally embraced Washington's doctrine of unilateral preemptive strikes in the hope of shoring up the interests of Australian capitalism, a second-rate imperialist power in the Asia-Pacific region.

In welcoming the decision, US ambassador Tom Schieffer predicted it would have "commercial benefits" for Australian industry. Part of the payoff may well be that local companies gain a few lucrative contracts.

The timing of the announcement seems intended to send a renewed signal of support to Bush on the eve of the US presidential election year, as well as to put pressure on the opposition Labor Party. Under its previous leader Simon Crean, Labor criticised the NMD proposal, taking a similar posture to the Hawke government, which declined to participate in Reagan's "Star Wars" scheme, while maintaining the closest relations with Washington.

Labor's recently-elected leader Mark Latham has been at pains to disassociate himself from earlier criticisms of Bush, made at the height of the antiwar demonstrations. In a clear departure from Crean's stance, he has refused to rule out backing the NMD, instead requesting a briefing from the government before making a public statement. "Our fundamental commitment to the [US] alliance is the foundation stone of national security," he declared at a media conference on December 10.



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