US military chief calls for “staging post” base in Australia

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The Pentagon’s highest-ranking military officer, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Richard Myers, called for even closer military ties with Australia when he visited the country for three days last week at the conclusion of a nine-day East Asian tour. Officially, the purpose of his Australian stop was to thank the Howard government for its unequivocal participation in three US-led wars—in Afghanistan, Iraq and the “war on terror”.

Prime Minister John Howard placed such importance on the visit that he interrupted his summer vacation to greet and be photographed with the general. Howard has aligned his administration totally with the US in the hope of securing ongoing American backing for Australian interests and operations in the Asia-Pacific region. Last month, Canberra confirmed that it would join the Bush administration’s controversial “missile defence” program despite concerns expressed in China, Indonesia and throughout the region about the program’s aggressive intent.

At a January 16 media conference, Myers let it be known that Washington expects a good deal more from its junior partner. While describing the Australia-US strategic relationship as one of the closest in the world, he revealed that he had proposed the establishment of a US training and logistics base in northern Australia and reiterated the need for the Australian military to maintain its “interoperability” with American forces.

In later media interviews, Myers referred to the base proposal as a “pre-positioning” staging post, which would house equipment, including tanks, aircraft, fuel and ammunition, to allow the rapid deployment of US troops into theatres of war. He insisted that, flowing from a global reassessment of its use of forces, the US had developed a “places, not bases” doctrine, which required permanent training facilities in various parts of the world.

Myers referred to the proposed base as a joint training facility and was at pains to deny that US troops would be garrisoned there. Yet, the US already has free run of training bases in Australia. It has conducted large-scale exercises with Australian forces for years, including the Tandem Thrust war games, staged every two years since 1995. The last two Tandem Thrust exercises, in Queensland in 2001 and in the US-controlled Marianas Islands in 2003, rehearsed invasions of other, unspecified, countries in the region.

Myers did not say precisely why the US needed a dedicated training base, or where it would be sited, leading to renewed speculation of US troops being shifted to Australia from Korea or Japan. Questioned by reporters, Myers declared that the proposal was still at the “scoping” stage with his Australian counterpart, General Peter Cosgrove. He added that the Pentagon had favoured the idea for some time, but the closer links developed over the past two years had given the plans new “vitality”.

Australia is already host to key US bases, including the satellite surveillance station at Pine Gap in central Australia (officially labelled a joint US-Australian facility) and the US naval communications facility at North West Cape, both of which could be utilised as part of the missile defence scheme. In late 2002, in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion, the Howard government agreed to allow the US military to use the Stirling naval base in Cockburn Sound on the west coast of Australia to rotate crews on US warships operating in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. It also offered use of the nearby Pearce air force Base in Perth, the Leeuwin Army Barracks and ship-to-shore and air-to-ground bombing facilities at Lancelin Defence Training Range.

Myers told the press conference that he had discussed

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with Cosgrove the "imperative" for Australia to maintain interoperability with the US. He emphasised the so-called "revolution in military affairs," involving the use of sophisticated weaponry, communications and intelligence-gathering. His remarks point to intense pressure on Canberra to purchase American military hardware, including the new M1A2 Abrams tank, rather than the German-built Leopard 2 tank that is under consideration to replace the Australian army's aging Leopard 1 tanks.

Myers' trip coincided with a week of negotiations in Canberra between US and Australian officials and military commanders over what equipment the Australian armed forces must acquire in order to participate in the anti-missile weapons system. No details have been released, but it is clear that the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, scheduled for May, will be conditional on Australia making specific multi-billion dollar purchases from the US.

So far, Defence Minister Robert Hill has indicated that Australia will buy three new $1 billion-plus destroyers during the next decade. They would be equipped with the current SM-2 model of anti-ballistic missile, but could have the systems in place to upgrade to the SM-3, which is still being trialled by the US Navy. Orion aircraft may also be armed with cruise missiles.

Howard used Myers' visit to emphasise his government's whole-hearted commitment to the missile defence scheme, frankly arguing that it was essential in order to maintain the US alliance. He said it was "common sense" for Australia to join the program because its long-term security depended on its "special relationship" with the United States.

Howard declared that the missile plan would not "rupture or upset relations" with "our friends" in the region. He brushed aside a warning from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a government-financed think-tank, of a possible diplomatic backlash from nuclear-armed China. Most nations understood Australia's decision, Howard claimed, and it was "extraordinary" to criticise a country's bid to give itself the capacity to defend itself against a missile attack in the future.

However, Indonesian MP Djoko Susilo, a member of the Indonesian parliament's commission for security, defence and foreign affairs, said Australia's purchase of warships with long-range anti-missile capabilities would be seen as an aggressive gesture. "Why do they need to buy that kind of sophisticated ship if they don't want to bother Indonesia?" he asked. "I know that Australian defence policy is to protect Australian from attack by northern countries. But which country is near northern Australia? It's obviously Indonesia."

A January 19 editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* strongly backed the establishment of a US military training base. It provided an unusually candid assessment of the advantages that many in ruling circles hope to gain from American support for Australian operations in the region. It referred to the experience in East Timor, where Washington endorsed an Australian-led intervention in 1999. Under the guise of protecting the Timorese people from pro-Indonesian militia violence, the Howard government deployed troops to secure corporate Australia's grip over the oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea.

"The lesson of East Timor is that we may always be called upon to commit troops to assist our neighbours, and thus will always rely on the intelligence, logistical and diplomatic support of the US, even if not on its direct involvement," the editorial stated.

Beyond its increasing dependence on the US military alliance to bolster Australian capitalism's strategic interests, the Howard government is anxiously seeking a commercial payoff, both in terms of Pentagon contracts for some Australian-based military suppliers and through a Free Trade Agreement with the US. Fifty Australian negotiators are in Washington this week for what the government has described as a final round of talks, in the hope of consummating a trade deal before the US election campaign.

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