

Australian PM outlines indefinite military agenda in South Pacific

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Australian Prime Minister John Howard has revealed the real motivations behind his government's interventions in the South Pacific and foreshadowed permanent military operations there. Speaking to the *Sunday Telegraph* on December 31, Howard acknowledged his concern that hostile rival powers, such as China and Taiwan, could "take over" the region. The prime minister also pointed to Washington's expectation that Australia would take responsibility for maintaining "stability" in an area US imperialism regards as its own sphere of influence.

Howard's comments are intended to signal that his government will not back down in the face of mounting hostility to its activities in the region, and will be prepared to utilise military force to suppress opposition. The *Telegraph* interview confirms that Australia's recent interventions in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Tonga, and Fiji are only the beginning of its long-term plans.

Howard's Pacific agenda is marked by recklessness, arrogance and complete disregard for international law. The government—and behind it the entire Australian political establishment—aims to politically and economically restructure the South Pacific in line with the strategic and economic interests of Australian imperialism. National sovereignty and the basic right of ordinary Pacific Islanders to determine their own future are regarded by Howard and his accomplices as totally irrelevant.

The emergence of Australian neo-colonialism in the Pacific occurs amid the eruption of US militarism and the re-surfacing of bitter inter-imperialist antagonisms, comparable to those that dominated world politics in the 1930s. Under the banner of the "global war on terror", the Bush administration has torn up international law and conventions, embarking on pre-emptive wars of aggression in an attempt to overcome America's declining economic status relative to its European and Asian rivals. Bush's recently announced escalation of the Iraq war, and its likely extension to Iran and Syria, underscores the speed with which the American ruling elite is resorting to outright criminality and truly barbaric methods of rule.

No part of the globe—including the South Pacific—is immune from the consequences of the breakdown of the international order established after World War II. Howard pointedly warned the Australian people to get used to permanent military deployment throughout the region. "This is a long, hard road, and it will need great patience and understanding by the Australian public to live with, probably for a period of 10 to 20 years, with a two-steps-forward, one-step-backward situation," he told the *Telegraph*.

"I can understand Australians saying, 'Well, look, let's forget about it. Leave them to their own devices; don't waste any money', but that's the wrong approach to take, because they will fall into the hands of the evil from other countries and we have to work very hard," he continued. "Certainly there's a bit of a battle between China and Taiwan... If we just throw up our arms and go away, you'll end up with these places being taken over by interests that are very hostile to Australia."

Notably, the prime minister made little effort to repeat his government's

usual justifications for Australia's neo-colonial interventions: rescuing "failed states", preventing terrorism, providing humanitarian aid, combating corruption, promoting democracy and the rule of law, etc. That he set these aside, pointing instead to the "evil" from Australia's rivals, indicates his alarm at the growing opposition to Canberra's manoeuvres among ordinary Pacific Islanders and the move by sections of the political elites in East Timor, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Fiji towards other powers, especially China, as a counterbalance to Australian demands and dominance.

The South Pacific has long been an arena for great power rivalries between the old colonial powers, France, Britain, and Australia, as well as Asian countries including Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The rising economic and diplomatic influence of China, however, is a new and profoundly destabilising factor that is challenging long-established relations. While Howard describes the South Pacific as Australia's "special patch", Beijing now has substantial economic interests in the region, and is seeking to develop its geo-strategic position.

The Chinese and Taiwanese governments are competing to secure diplomatic recognition from the various Pacific states. Of the 24 countries in the world that recognise Taipei over Beijing, six are in the Pacific (Palau, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Nauru, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati). Governments in the region have played off the two powers against each other, granting diplomatic recognition and support in the UN General Assembly to the highest bidder in terms of aid and trade agreements. Both China and Taiwan have been accused of bribing favoured politicians and factions to ensure the installation of friendly governments.

China's interest in the South Pacific, however, goes far beyond the question of Taiwan and the "one China" policy. An estimated 3,000 state-owned and private Chinese companies operate in the region, including in mining, logging, fishing, and tourism. Economic ties are rapidly developing. Bilateral trade between China and Papua New Guinea, the South Pacific's largest economy (and until 1975 Australia's colony), has increased from \$A5 million in 1991, to \$A233 million in 2000, to \$A540 million in 2005.

The region's natural resources now help fuel China's ongoing industrial expansion. Papua New Guinea, for example, was China's second largest source of logs in 2005, behind Russia, and 80 percent of PNG's log exports go to China. One of China's largest overseas investment projects, the Ramu nickel mine, is located in PNG. Opened late last year, the mine was developed by China's Metallurgical Construction Corp after Beijing reached a \$US915 million financing agreement with the PNG government. The investment was directly driven by a shortage of raw materials for China's stainless steel industry.

The Beijing bureaucracy is investing considerable resources in its diplomatic relations with the South Pacific countries. China now has more diplomats in the region than any other country, and Pacific leaders visiting Beijing are granted lavish receptions. While there are no official figures

available, Chinese aid to the South Pacific is estimated at more than \$A300 million annually—a sum nearly twice the total gross domestic product of the three poorest nations in the region (Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu). Much of Beijing's aid is devoted to prominent “prestige projects”—sports stadiums in Fiji and Samoa, a parliamentary complex in Vanuatu, and new foreign ministry headquarters in PNG—and unlike Australian aid money, Chinese funding does not require Pacific governments to fulfil “good governance” and other obligations.

Several American and Australian foreign policy analysts have warned of the long-term strategic implications of China's growing influence. In World War II, the US was forced to wage a series of bloody battles against the Japanese to secure control of the Pacific Islands. After the war, US authorities considered the entire Pacific Ocean to be an “American lake”. In partnership with allies such as Australia, Washington's intent was to maintain exclusive control and prevent any potential adversaries from gaining a foothold in the strategically significant region.

Stratfor, an American security and intelligence think tank, has warned that, “China's need to counter American power—combined with Beijing's limited naval capability—makes a Pacific Island strategy as natural to them as it was to the Japanese decades ago.” Stratfor raised the prospect of Beijing attempting to counter US naval dominance by stationing missiles in South Pacific countries. “While Beijing is unlikely to deploy forces to the South Pacific soon, its relationships with the island nations offer it a strategic tool to counter US naval power in Asia. The Chinese military has paid great attention to the development of shore-based anti-ship missile systems it eventually could deploy throughout the South Pacific and Southeast Asia.”

The US has already made clear its unwillingness to allow any erosion of its military position in the Pacific. Washington paid considerable attention to a satellite tracking station constructed by the Chinese government in Kiribati in 1997. While Beijing insisted the station was only used for scientific and commercial purposes, the Bush administration alleged that it was being used to develop a Chinese space warfare program and also spy on the US military's missile testing facility in the neighbouring Marshall Islands. This facility is vital for the development of the Bush administration's Strategic Defence Initiative (“Son of Star Wars”) missile defence system. The Chinese tracking station was shut down in 2004 after Kiribati's government recognised Taipei. Although never proven, Washington was widely believed to have been involved in behind-the-scenes manoeuvres encouraging the diplomatic switch.

Canberra fears Beijing's growing influence in the South Pacific for a number of reasons. China's increasing commercial ties—particularly its aggressive pursuit of oil, gas, minerals, timber, and fishing investments—threatens corporate Australia's dominant position in the exploitation of the region's natural resources. Canberra's foreign policy establishment is also hostile to Beijing and Taipei's aid and trade rivalry, which it considers a threat to its efforts to cultivate compliant pro-Australian regimes in the Pacific states.

Canberra's alliance with Washington is a critical factor shaping the Howard government's response to Beijing's entry into the South Pacific. Bush has previously designated China as a “strategic competitor” and looks to Canberra to defend US interests in the region.

In the *Sunday Telegraph* interview, Howard explained, “That's why we've been increasing the size of our army. It's all designed to give us the capacity to deal with things in the region. And this is our responsibility. The rest of the world looks to us to do it, and the more we are able to play our part effectively here, the less is legitimately expected of us in other parts of the world. That's not to say we won't do other things, but if we can have an effective stabilising role in the whole Pacific region, I can assure you that is mightily important to the Americans and to our allies in Europe.”

The Howard government has unconditionally backed the Bush

administration's criminal interventions in the Middle East, dispatching troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq. In return, Washington has provided critical backing for Canberra's operations in the Pacific. Underlying this quid pro quo is a convergence of interests, with the Howard government advancing its agenda in the region under the aegis of US imperialism's claim to global hegemony. This is the essence of Howard's self-proclaimed role of “deputy sheriff”.

The Bush administration's so-called war on terror and its doctrine of “regime change” and pre-emptive war were the basis for the Howard government's takeover of the Solomon Islands in 2003, when it dispatched hundreds of soldiers, police, and bureaucratic personnel to the tiny country. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was subsequently hailed as a model military-led intervention into a “failing state” that could be applied throughout the region. When announcing the expansion of the Australian military last year, Howard named Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu as further potential targets.

The Bush administration has repeatedly expressed its appreciation of Canberra's role. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was asked last month whether she was disappointed that Australian troops were not playing a more front-line role in Iraq. “I would never use the word disappointment in the same line with Australia,” she replied. “This is a country that, not only in Iraq, not only in Afghanistan, not only in tsunami relief, not only in support for all that we're doing in the Asia Pacific, but also in taking really primary responsibility in places like the Solomon Islands, Fiji, East Timor, has put its resources and its assets at the disposal of peace and security in the region, and in the spread of freedom. And I just can't think of a better friend and a better ally.”

Nevertheless, Canberra and Washington do not share identical positions in relation to Beijing. The Howard government has generally adopted a less belligerent stance than the Bush administration. This is due to the Australian ruling elite's interest in maintaining its lucrative exports of natural resources such as gas, gold, iron ore, coal, and aluminium to China. These exports have been crucial for Australia's economic growth—and Howard's electoral successes—over the past decade. Canberra is currently seeking to negotiate a free trade deal with Beijing.

Despite these differences, the Howard government and the Bush administration agree that no potentially hostile power can be permitted to advance its strategic and economic interests in the South Pacific at their expense. That Howard abandoned his usual caution in the *Telegraph* interview and identified China as a rival indicates just how much is at stake.

The Howard government's vision of neo-colonial military-led interventions in the Pacific lasting 10 to 20 years presents enormous dangers to working people and youth in the Pacific Islands and in Australia.

It will inevitably produce a catastrophe. The population of the Pacific Islands have suffered a long history of British, French, German, and Australian colonial domination. It is impossible that such forms of rule can be peacefully imposed in the twenty-first century. Pacific Islanders have every right to resist Canberra's machinations and it is only a matter of time before Australian soldiers and police are targeted. The initial stages of such a struggle are already evident in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. Canberra will respond by escalating its violence and repression, unleashing military force on a scale not seen in the Pacific since World War II.

The domestic repercussions will be no less calamitous. Democratic rights are already under sustained attack, and this will intensify as opposition to Howard's agenda mounts. Bourgeois democratic norms and basic legal and constitutional rights are fundamentally incompatible with a state of permanent military mobilisation. In its efforts to forge a constituency for war and divert mounting social tensions, the political and media establishment is pumping out the poison of national

chauvinism—involving the incitement of anti-Muslim racism and promotion of “Australian values”—and glorifying militarism.

Young people face a future of being dragooned into the armed forces as cannon fodder for military interventions. School children are already being encouraged to enlist in the cadets and then the army. The Howard government has introduced a military “gap year” for those who have finished school but do not wish to immediately begin their tertiary education. Last year Howard announced that an additional \$10 billion will be spent to recruit another 2,600 troops, on top of a 1,500 increase announced in December 2005, bringing the total increase to 20 percent. Half a billion dollars has also been committed for the near doubling of the Australian Federal Police’s “international deployment group”—an outfit focussed on operations in the South Pacific. Inevitably, these initiatives will soon be accompanied by moves to introduce conscription.

The billions of dollars in public funds being poured into the military represent a massive social misappropriation. While funding for public health and education, social infrastructure, and welfare and social services have all been gutted by successive state and federal governments, “defence” spending has skyrocketed. Australia is now the eleventh largest military spender in the world and ranks ahead of countries such as Israel, Turkey, Brazil, and Iran.

The political starting point for a struggle against the turn to militarism and war is the recognition that not a single element within the Australian political and media establishment opposes any aspect of the Howard government’s neo-colonial operations in the South Pacific. To the extent that the opposition Labor Party and its new leader Kevin Rudd have any criticisms of the government, they are all from the right. Rudd accuses Howard of incompetence for allowing an “arc of instability” to develop, and advocates greater tact in diplomatic efforts aimed at browbeating Australia’s neighbours. Like the Greens, Labor calls for the redeployment of Australian troops from Iraq to the South Pacific in order to bolster operations in East Timor, the Solomons, and elsewhere.

The unanimous defence by Labor and the minor parties of Australia’s Pacific interventions ultimately derives from their support for the profit system and the nation-state system upon which it rests. Opposition to war, militarism, and neo-colonialism can only be advanced on an independent socialist and internationalist basis.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will be standing candidates in the New South Wales state election scheduled for March 24 and the federal election due later this year. Our campaign will be focussed on building a mass movement of the working class against militarism and war—in Iraq, the Middle East and in the South Pacific. We demand the immediate withdrawal of all US, Australian and other troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and all Australian soldiers, police, and bureaucratic personnel from the Pacific. We demand an end to all those regional “aid” programs that function as nothing more than international slush funds for Australian corporations.

Instead, billions of dollars in genuine aid must be spent to lift the Pacific Islands out of poverty and undo the terrible legacy of colonialism and the damage still being inflicted by International Monetary Fund and World Bank programs.

At the same time, the SEP defends the right of every worker in the region to freely travel and work in Australia with full democratic and legal rights. We urge every socially conscious worker and young person in Australia and throughout the Pacific to take up the fight for this perspective by contacting the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and building it as the new international party of the working class.





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