

US-Australia defence deal underlines regional rivalry at APEC summit

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Shortly after his arrival in Sydney, President Bush set the tone for this week's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit by signing a new defence agreement with Australia and vowing once again that there would be no US retreat from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While APEC is billed as a forum for cooperation among Pacific Rim leaders, the summit is torn by barely disguised tensions and rivalries between the major powers—in particular between the US and China.

Australia has assumed growing importance as a US ally, not only because of Canberra's unflinching support for the Bush administration's military aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia, but as a significant element of US efforts to counter China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Bush spent Wednesday in discussion with Australian Prime Minister John Howard and the cabinet's National Security Committee where the US occupation of Iraq and sharpening conflict with Iran featured prominently.

At their joint press conference, Bush gave fulsome praise to Howard for his backing for the "war on terror". For his part, Howard, who faces an election this year and is trailing badly in opinion polls, emphasised his government's commitment to the deeply unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by declaring that Australian forces "will not be reduced or withdrawn." Howard's backing for these neo-colonial occupations is based on the calculation that US support is essential to shore up Australian strategic interests in the Asia Pacific region, including its own predatory operations in Pacific states like the Solomon Islands and East Timor.

The Defence Trade Cooperation Treaty further consolidates intimate military ties by placing Australia on a par with Britain, in allowing the Australian military access to sensitive, hi-tech defence technology and equipment without the present cumbersome US licencing procedure. Australian manufacturers will also gain access as contractors to the huge and potentially highly lucrative US defence industries. Other areas of expanded defence cooperation include intelligence, joint operations and humanitarian aid.

Australia already hosts a number of key American bases, including at Pine Gap and Nurrungar, which are critical to the functioning of global US military operations, including in the

Middle East. These bases are integral components of the global network of satellites operated by the Pentagon, CIA and other US agencies for intelligence gathering, communication, navigation and weapons guidance. The Howard government has also signed on to the Bush administration's missile defence shield, nominally directed at so-called rogue states such as North Korea, but in reality aimed at neutralising the military capacity of rival powers such as China and Russia.

Australia and the US have also been stepping up the full range of joint military exercises to further integrate their defence forces. One of the largest-ever combined war games, Operation Talisman Sabre, involving more than 26,000 US and Australian troops, warplanes and naval vessels took place in Queensland and the Northern Territory in June. Among the war games, aimed at enhancing the ability to respond to "regional contingencies", was a large-scale amphibious landing. Washington has been pressing Canberra for greater access to training and maintenance facilities as well as other steps to enhance Australia as a base for US military operations. The agreement on "humanitarian aid" enables the American military to store supplies and equipment in Australia.

In a comment entitled "US, Australia: A Pacific United Kingdom", the US-based think tank Stratfor highlighted Canberra's growing importance in Washington's strategic thinking—likening Australia's potential role to that of Britain which serves as "a crucial beachhead" and "the linchpin for the United States in Western Eurasia".

"The recent encroachment of Chinese and Russian influence across East Asia has reminded the United States of the fierce competition for dominance in the region. As the world's centre of gravity continues to shift from Europe, other allies have become increasingly significant for Washington. And because of a striking parallel, the two countries Washington recently signed defence accords with [Britain and Australia] can serve similar purposes in their respective regions," Stratfor commented.

In comments to the ABC's "Lateline" program on Wednesday, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also underscored US reliance on Australia to defend their mutual interests and exclude rival powers in the Pacific. "Australia is a special ally. Australia is not only doing the hard work in places

like Afghanistan and Iraq that get a lot of attention, but Australia is doing hard work also here in the region, in the Solomon Islands, in Timor Leste, where you have a new democracy that Australia's gone to the aid of... in Fiji, in Tonga. When I call [Australian foreign minister] Alexander Downer I say 'You're in the lead in the Pacific, what can we do to help?'"

Australia's role in Washington's broader regional plans to contain China is also evident at the APEC summit. On Saturday morning, Bush and Howard are due to sit down with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for what will be the inaugural meeting of a trilateral security summit. Among the topics, China's military build-up is expected to be high on the list. Australia and Japan separately have longstanding bilateral defence pacts with the US, but it was only in March that Howard signed a joint security declaration with Abe, as a step towards a trilateral arrangement involving the US.

For the Howard government, these security arrangements involve a rather precarious balancing act. While Australian imperialism is completely dependent on US backing to advance its strategic interests in the region, its economic prosperity is increasingly linked to Asia, in particular its fastest growing economy, China. Huge and expanding exports of raw materials to China have underwritten Australian growth rates over past decade, and, as a consequence, the political fortunes of the Howard government. China's economic importance to Canberra was underlined yesterday when Howard met with Chinese President Hu Jintao and concluded a \$35 billion deal for the export of liquified natural gas.

While taking part in trilateral security talks with Japan and the US, Howard has been at pains to stress: "It's not directed at anyone. It's certainly not directed at the Chinese. But it's an expression of the commonality of interest that the three Pacific democracies have." To further placate Chinese sensitivities, Foreign Minister Downer announced yesterday that Australia and China would hold annual security talks "to show how much we value engaging with China on the range of strategic issues important to our region and beyond."

President Bush's diplomatic approach to China was far blunter. He is under pressure from sections of the American business and political elite to intervene more aggressively to counteract growing Chinese influence in Asia and to press Beijing to make a series of economic concessions. Bush's own former deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, told the *Australian* on Monday: "In every measure, China is making real hay right throughout Asia. It's not that we're ignoring Asia, a little bit; we're ignoring it totally... Right now, we're just so preoccupied with Iraq, that we're ignoring Asia totally."

Even before he landed in Sydney, Bush shot back in an onboard press conference: "I know there has been speculation in the Australian press. Well, is this a China summit? The answer is absolutely not." In comments to the media on Wednesday, the president repeatedly described the US

relationship with China as "complex". After noting the growing economic interdependence of the two countries, he went on to outline a list of contentious topics for talks with Chinese President Hu.

After holding talks with Hu yesterday, Bush made clear he had pressed China to back tougher action against Iran, including US-sponsored sanctions at the UN Security Council. Other topics included US objections to China's relations with the Sudanese regime, demands for a revision of China's unvalued currency, and concerns over the safety of Chinese goods. Bush has also made clear that he intends to "speak out" about Burma and its human rights abuses at the APEC summit. Highlighting Burma's "tyrannical behaviour" has nothing to do with any concern for democratic rights, but is aimed at focussing attention and pressure on one of China's closest allies in Asia.

Perhaps the most pointed US message to China is the five-power naval exercise that is currently underway in the Bay of Bengal. The war games are one expression of US efforts to expand the trilateral arrangement with Japan and Australia to include other Asian powers, particularly India, traditionally one of China's regional rivals. The six-day naval exercise involves more than 20 warships from the US, India, Japan, Australia and Singapore, including three aircraft carriers—two from the US and one from India. "This will perhaps be the biggest ever peace-time joint naval exercise in Asia," Indian navy spokesman Captain Vinay Garg boasted.

All countries involved have stressed that the exercise is not directed against China, but is aimed at ensuring the security of the region's sea lanes. The obvious question concerning such exercises is never asked or answered: who is this vast armada supposed to be protecting shipping from? The war games are clearly a menacing demonstration that US and allied warships can control the vital sea lanes on which China is dependent for its vital supplies of oil and gas from the Middle East.

It is one more sign that for all the diplomatic hot air at the APEC summit about the need for international cooperation, the developing great power tensions cannot be resolved peacefully.



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