

Australian government announces military buildup as strategic dilemma intensifies

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18 May 2009

In its new Defence White Paper, published on May 2, the Australian Labor government has committed to a major military build-up, under the aegis of the country's postwar alliance with the United States, despite mounting concern over the decline of American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and the prospect of conflict with China.

The White Paper is cast in language that is cautious and, at times, confused. It refers only to "possibilities", "risks" and scenarios that "cannot be ruled out". The document, however, anticipates that the next 20 years, during which the military expansion will take place, will be dominated by uncertainty and instability.

It warns: "There are likely to be tensions between the major powers in the region, where the interests of the United States, China, Japan, India and Russia intersect. As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably rise. When this happens there will be the possibility of miscalculation. There is a small but concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these powers."

The prospect of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region poses a fundamental dilemma for the Australian financial and corporate elite. For over 60 years, its economic, political and strategic interests have been asserted within the framework of the US alliance. During the past decade, however, China has become Australia's most important trading partner and source of major new investment.

At the centre of a still-unresolved debate within ruling circles is the question: where should Australia line up in the event of a major political or military clash between the US and China? Whatever the choice, the political and economic consequences would be far-reaching.

With his government's White Paper, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has come down on the side of those arguing that there is no viable alternative to maintaining Australian dependence on the US. The Labor government's defence and foreign policy revolves around using a beefed-up military to augment the fighting capacity of the US in the Asia-Pacific as Washington seeks to retain its postwar economic and political dominance within the region. This will include fighting in concert with the US against any major regional rival, such as China.

One section of the document nervously speculates that the United States might become "preoccupied and stretched in some parts of the world" and be forced to rely on Canberra to play a major military role in protecting their mutual financial and geo-political interests in the area regarded as Australia's "backyard".

The global economic crisis has dramatically heightened these concerns. The document notes that some countries have already experienced "low levels of instability and protest". "Extremists in South East Asia, South Asia and elsewhere", it declares, could gain support by appealing to "popular resentment fuelled by economic woes". It implies military interventions may be necessary.

China is identified as the primary threat to US dominance, and thus to Australian interests, as it "is likely to be able to continue to afford its foreshadowed core military modernisation". Moreover, nations in economic meltdown will be "easier targets for foreign influence"—an implicit reference to the way Chinese financial aid is already being used to attract many countries into Beijing's orbit.

The Chinese regime has already taken note of the White Paper and its defence orientation. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson told the *Australian* that "China is a peaceful force that forms no threat to any other countries" and insisted that other countries should "view China's military build-up objectively [and] without bias".

Comments by Chinese military analyst, Rear Admiral Yang Yi, were more direct. He denounced the categorisation of China as a threat. "I really can't understand this stupid, this crazy idea from Australia. I am very concerned and worried about it," Yi declared. "This assessment by Australia carries the risk of stimulating an arms race in the region."

At the most fundamental level, the White Paper constitutes an unintentional indictment of global capitalism and the nation-state system. Apart from its admission that war may well break out between rival nuclear-armed powers, the Rudd Labor government expects that much of the world's population will face a social catastrophe in the coming decades.

The document lists the prospect of conflicts and "mass migration flows" triggered by either "demographic change"; "environmental and resource pressures including climate change"; "global health risks"; and even "transnational crime". It assesses that civil and regional wars over scarce resources such as "food, water and energy supplies" will rage across the Middle East and Africa.

Amidst this anticipated turmoil, Labor's myopic preoccupation is to protect the property, wealth and influence of the Australian ruling elite in the South Pacific and South East Asia. It defines the area of vital strategic concern as the vast swathe of territory "from the eastern Indian Ocean to the island states of Polynesia, and from the equator to the Southern Ocean", i.e. Antarctica.

Various scenarios

The White Paper identifies four potential scenarios requiring the use of military force.

The first is a threat to the Australian government itself, which the Rudd government has ominously defined as potentially coming from both external and *internal* sources. In a reference to the prospect of the military being deployed against political unrest in Australia, the White Paper specifies that the armed forces must be able to “support civil authorities in relation to domestic security and emergency response tasks”.

Secondly, Labor envisages that the military, supported by the paramilitary arm of the Federal Police, will be carrying out more interventions in the South Pacific and East Timor in order to guarantee “stability and security”—a euphemism for ensuring that the Island states remain under Australian economic and political control. The White Paper suggests that a trigger for an invasion of a Pacific nation could be a move by another power, such as China, to establish bases on its territory.

Thirdly, Labor anticipates that Australian governments will be called upon by the United States to make military contributions—“including potentially substantial ones”—to US-led operations in the Asia-Pacific. Taiwan is labelled as a “source of potential strategic miscalculation” that could result in conflict. Other scenarios include a war on the Korean Peninsula or an intervention following the “collapse” of the North Korean regime.

Finally, the White Paper expects that Washington will invoke Australia’s obligations under the US alliance and request that it send troops to take part in future neo-colonial invasions and wars in other parts of the world, following the examples set by the US-led wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The document defines participation in future conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia as “not a principal task” of the Australian military, but goes on to reassure Washington that such participation, if requested, would certainly be considered. It indicates that the deployment of Australian troops in Afghanistan is effectively indefinite and that the US satellite base at Pine Gap—critical to the deployment of the US nuclear arsenal—remains a “central element” of Australia’s relationship with the US.

A key purpose of the White Paper is to justify the outlay of more than \$100 billion on new military hardware over the next 20 years. During that period, the Navy will be re-equipped with 12 new conventional submarines and several new frigates, all armed with US Tomahawk Cruise missiles capable of hitting targets 2,500 kilometres (1,800 miles) away. While the document makes no mention of it, this will be the first time that the Australian military has weapons capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

The government will purchase two troop carriers to facilitate maritime interventions, along with heavy lift and troop lift helicopters. The Air Force will get 100 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, as well as long-range refueling aircraft and early detection planes.

The White Paper argues that this military expansion will allow Australia’s relatively tiny armed forces to “act independently” and possess “defence self-reliance”. Such claims are patent nonsense. China, for example, will soon be capable of deploying aircraft carriers, scores of

surface vessels and dozens of nuclear and conventional submarines into the South Pacific and South East Asia. The real purpose of the hardware purchases is not self-reliance, but ensuring that the Australian military has sufficient capacity to provide a useful addition to a US-led force in the event of conflict.

The Labor government is taking the prospect of war so seriously that its White Paper is the first defence document in decades to explicitly refer to the possibility of introducing compulsory military conscription. Far from being just a theoretical observation, it declares that the Defence Department is drawing up a plan for “national mobilisation ... in order to have appropriate strategies in place”.

The paper also outlines plans for the expansion of so-called “high readiness reserves”, which could be called up to “surge” the military on short notice. Another proposal involves contracting corporations in industries with military applications—such as telecommunications, transport, shipping, airlines and health care—to turn their employees over to the armed forces in times of crisis. Private military companies, or mercenaries, which have played such a prominent role in the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, will also be used if necessary.

Labor defines its defence policy as “strategic hedging”. This amounts to gambling that an expanded military, coupled with US military power, will be able to stave off any challenge to US or Australian imperialist interests in the Asia-Pacific, which the government recognises could well result in nuclear war.

No section of the ruling elite appears to have an alternative. Military analysts, along with both former and serving military commanders, have generally endorsed Rudd’s White Paper. Even the *Australian’s* right wing Greg Sheridan, often a critic of Labor, declared the government had “mostly come up with the right decisions”.

Throughout the past century, from the time it pledged “the last man, the last shilling” to participate in World War 1, defending Australian imperialism has been the central plank of the Labor Party’s program.

The immediate obstacle facing Rudd’s military plans, however, is the unwillingness of most Australian youth to enlist in the armed forces—a reflection of the widespread opposition to militarism and imperialist war. This year, the tiny Australian army has reached just 91 percent of its recruitment target, while the even smaller navy has barely hit 71 percent. At present, it can only provide crews for three of its six submarines.

These figures point to one calculation behind the drastic cutbacks announced by Labor this month to youth welfare allowances. Unemployment and poverty, both rapidly growing due to the global economic meltdown, are viewed as crucial whips to compel young people to sign up for a military career. And if economic conscription proves insufficient, then Labor’s White Paper makes clear the government will turn to direct forms of compulsion to get the cannon fodder it needs for its future wars.



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