

Australian defence review prepares for war with China

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The initial recommendations of a “posture review” of the Australian armed forces, unveiled this week, dovetail with the preparations by US imperialism for a military confrontation with China. They confirm that the Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is thrusting Australia into the frontline of a potential war for dominance in the Asian region, behind the backs of the population and with no public debate of the consequences.

The review is being undertaken by former defence and foreign policy officials, Allan Hawke and Ric Smith, and will not be completed until March. The Gillard government, however, decided to make public a “progress report” completed in December.

The basic conclusion of Hawke and Smith is that the Australian military must shift a large proportion of its hardware and personnel to the sparsely-populated north of the continent, away from the major population centres in the south-east. They advocate the upgrading of ports and air bases in the north and northwest of the country in order to service large ships and aircraft. They also urge the substantial upgrading of the airfield on the remote Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean.

The Australian press deliberately sensationalised the justification offered by Hawke and Smith for the military focus on northern Australia—to defend the vast mineral and natural gas resources in the region. While the authors do not specify a potential enemy, the more extreme media commentary sought to stoke fears of an Asian, particularly a Chinese, threat to Australia.

The primary reason given by Hawke and Smith for a military realignment is not, in fact, “defending” the

north, but what they describe several times as the “competitive multipolar order” in the Asian region—in other words, the strategic rivalry and growing tensions between the US and China. Steps must be taken, they insist, to enhance the ability of the Australian armed forces to participate in the expanding operations of the US military in “the Indian Ocean and South East Asia.”

Hawke and Smith are essentially writing a document to provide the Labor government with justifications for what it has already set in motion. The agreements struck between the Obama administration and the Gillard government last November will result in northern and western Australia developing into a major US staging base. The city of Darwin will host a 2,500-strong marine force by 2016, while American air and naval assets will make more frequent visits to Australian bases.

The attractiveness of northern Australia to the US military is its proximity to the critical sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Sea trade between Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, including the critical oil and gas imports that sustain the Chinese and other major Asian economies, must pass through one of these passages.

The most important is the Straits of Malacca between the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Close to 80 percent of Asia-Pacific trade travels via this route. Very large ships, however, must use the Sunda Strait, between Sumatra and Java, or the 250-metre deep Lombok Strait, between Bali and Lombok—just 1,700 kilometres from Darwin. The Australian-held Cocos Islands and Christmas Island are even closer to these key straits.

Amid mounting rivalry between the US and China, American strategy is designed to ensure it retains overwhelming military dominance. The “pivot” to Asia announced by the Obama administration last year means positioning forces throughout the region that can permanently threaten Beijing with a naval blockade of the sea lanes and the strangling of its economy.

Every country in the Asian region has come under intense pressure from Washington to line up with this aggressive stance, despite the likely impact on their trade relations with China. Kevin Rudd was ousted as Australian prime minister in June 2010 in large part due to his equivocation in lining up with the US. The Gillard government, with a chastised Rudd as foreign minister, has provided unconditional support.

The posture review makes clear that the Labor government views the primary function of the Australian armed forces as a supplement to American operations and that it is prepared to spend billions of dollars to ensure adequate facilities are at the disposal of US ships, aircraft and troops.

The Cocos Islands airfield is nominated for upgrading as it has “significant military strategic value as a staging location for maritime air patrol and surveillance activities, given their position in the Indian Ocean and close to South East Asia.”

“Improved facilities” at the naval base in Perth, Western Australia, Hawke and Smith write, “could also be used for deployments and operations... by US Navy major surface combatants and aircraft carriers.” Brisbane is nominated as the main east coast naval centre as it is a “nuclear powered warship-rated port to facilitate US Navy visits.”

The Labor government’s commitment to the US agenda is largely supported throughout the Australian political establishment. The report’s conclusions were welcomed by the conservative Liberal/National opposition. The only reaction of the Greens party, which props up the minority Labor government, was to complain about the safety dangers of nuclear-powered and armed US warships visiting Australian ports. The

Greens have been staunch advocates of an Australian military focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

The militarist agenda outlined in the posture review has an inexorable and reactionary logic. The whipping up of anti-Chinese sentiment has already begun. Claims of a threat from the north will be accompanied by a further expansion of military, police and intelligence powers. Moves toward conscription are implicit in the posture review’s complaints that it is difficult to attract military personnel to serve in the remote and poorly-serviced northern areas of the country.

It falls to the working class to answer the threat of war, through the development of the closest unity of workers across the Asia-Pacific and internationally, and a common struggle for socialism to put an end to the capitalist profit system and its outmoded division of the world into competing nation-states.



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