

US Marines begin operations in northern Australia

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The transformation of northern Australia into a hub for US operations in the Asia-Pacific region against China has begun. The first unit of American Marines to be stationed in the city of Darwin arrived on April 4, while preparations for US ships and long-range bombers to use Australian military bases are proceeding apace. Plans have been leaked about stationing unmanned surveillance drones on the Australian-held Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. These moves flow from the agreements announced last November between the Obama administration and the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

There are just 200 personnel in the initial Marine deployment, but this will expand to a 2,500-strong air-ground task force by 2017. Ostensibly, the purpose of the US presence is to train soldiers and enhance the inter-operability of Australian and American forces. Both the Obama administration and the Gillard government have sought to present the presence of US combat troops as a contribution to natural disaster relief in the region. In reality, the stationing of Marines in Darwin is part of broader US plans for logistical and supply depots, accompanied by the upgrading and expansion of Australian port and airbase facilities for US military use.

The US military activity in northern Australia is just one component of Obama's "pivot" to Asia, which is aimed at containing and undermining China's influence in the world's fastest growing economic region. The Obama administration's intention is to encircle China with a network of American alliances and bases in order to reinforce US strategic dominance in the Asia Pacific.

A key US objective is to control the sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, through which most of China's exports and imports pass. The Obama administration claims its only concern is to keep the shipping lanes open, but US forces would also have the ability to mount a crippling economic blockade of China.

The US ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich, referred to the strategic significance of northern Australia during a welcome ceremony for the Marines on April 4. He declared that the US had to be "prepared for any issue that could come up" regarding the sea lanes through South East Asia. "Darwin is ideal for the ability to do that. You have access to the Pacific Ocean, to the Indian Ocean, to the East Timor Sea and the trade routes all around," he said.

The rapidity with which the US is pursuing its aggressive posture toward China is provoking growing concerns in sections of the ruling elites throughout the region and around the world. The danger of military conflict has been underscored in recent days by a tense stand-off in the South China Sea between Filipino and Chinese naval vessels. Washington has actively encouraged the Philippines to assert its sovereignty over waters claimed by Beijing, heightening tensions in one of Asia's volatile flashpoints.

In Washington, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski have warned of the dangers of a US-China confrontation. Similar fears have been raised in Australian military and foreign policy circles over the Gillard government's unconditional alignment with the US against China. While no section of the

Australian ruling class questions the necessity of the 70-year US military alliance, there are fears that an anti-China stance could threaten the commercial interests of Australian companies. China is now the country's largest trading partner and its major export market for minerals and natural gas.

On April 12, the former head of the Australian Army, General Peter Leahy, added his voice to those expressing trepidation. His comment in the *Australian*, unambiguously titled "We must not get too close to the US," reflected the dilemma wracking the Australian political establishment in the face of growing US-China tensions. Leahy supported the deployment of US Marines to Darwin and Washington's focus on Asia as a necessary price for Australia's US alliance, but declared there was "cause for concern if the US pivot is handled hastily or insensitively and China sees itself as surrounded." He noted: "Economic pressure on Japan was a contributing factor to the outbreak of World War II."

Leahy, who directs the National Security Institute think tank in Canberra, explained that the US military build-up in Australia sought to control "sea lines of communication" and "resource assets in the South China Sea." He declared that the US-Australia basing agreements, made "without public debate or discussion," were "momentous decisions with far-reaching consequences." They "potentially implicate Australia in a series of actions that could lead to increased tensions and even conflict with China."

"War," the former general wrote, "is improbable but not impossible." Australia, he concluded, would have to consider "if, where and when to draw the line" in its alliance with the US.

Since World War II, Australian imperialism has relied heavily on US backing to assert its strategic and economic interests internationally and within the Asia-Pacific region. In return, Australian governments have supported US foreign policy and sent troops to fight and die in successive US neo-colonial wars, from Korea and Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Under Gillard, Australia is embroiled in the Obama

administration's escalating diplomatic and strategic confrontation with China. Leahy is speaking for sections of the ruling establishment who are deeply concerned about the dangers and are urging a more independent stance in order not to undermine relations with Beijing.

The US military build-up in Australia has not gone unnoticed in China. An editorial in the state-controlled *China Daily* on April 11 warned: "If Canberra continues to place more importance on its alliance with Washington, the trend of giving China the cold shoulder will eventually hurt the good momentum that the two countries have worked to build." It was a pointed reference to Australia's economic dependence on China.

The arrival of US Marines in Darwin is a warning to workers and youth that Australia is being swept up in the developing geo-political maelstrom in the Indo-Pacific as the US wields its military muscle to undermine Chinese strategic and economic interests throughout the region. By signing on to the Obama administration's confrontational strategy, the Gillard government, without public discussion or debate, has put working people in Australia on the frontline of any conflict with China.



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