

Australian military plans for invasion of Fiji and PNG

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12 June 2012

The *Australian* reported in its weekend edition that military strategists drew up detailed plans for the invasion of the island-states of Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) as part of the Labor government's 2009 Defence White Paper. The plans were part of a "top-secret Force Structure Review and analytic documents supporting it—which were prepared in conjunction with the white paper—and were presented to the National Security Committee of cabinet for consideration."

The *Australian* had previously revealed that the 2009 White Paper also contained a "secret chapter" dealing with how the Australian military would assist American forces impose a naval blockade on Chinese trade in the event of a US-Sino war and assessed the prospect of retaliatory Chinese missile strikes on Australian territory. (See: "New book confirms US-Australia plans for war on China")

The military preparations for the small Pacific Island countries of PNG and Fiji stem from their economic and strategic importance to Australian imperialism. The contingency planning is part of Canberra's response to China's growing relations with the two countries. PNG, Fiji, and the entire South Pacific have historically been viewed by the Australian political establishment as part of its "sphere of influence." PNG was a direct Australian colony until 1975 and Australian banks and corporations have significant stakes in its economy. US transnational Exxon-Mobil, along with various Australian-based partners, has committed some \$16 billion to develop natural gas fields in PNG, which are expected to begin production in 2014. Australian companies also have substantial interests in Fiji's sugar and tourism industries.

Australian according the plans for Fiji were based on scenarios in which Australian military forces intervene to suppress an outbreak of "civil strife" or the "breakdown of order." While widespread poverty and unemployment are certainly generating heightened social tensions in both countries, the primary concern of Canberra, and Washington, is that any civil unrest would be exploited by its regional rivals—especially China—to boost their influence.

The US has made clear that it expects Australia to ensure that Chinese influence is pushed back in PNG. "We are in a competition with China," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bluntly declared in March 2011. "Exxon Mobil is producing it [natural gas]. China is in there every day, in every way, trying to figure out how it's going to come in behind us, come in under us."

Washington has also pressured Canberra to do more to reverse China's growing influence in Fiji after the imposition of Australian and international sanctions following the military's seizure of power in 2006.

In response to questions by the *Australian*, a spokesman for Defence Minister Stephen Smith again denied that the 2009 White Paper had contained a "top secret section... regarding China or any other country", but acknowledged that it had included assessments into the ability of the Australian military to "achieve the strategic tasks required of it."

An anonymous "Canberra insider" told the newspaper: "All militaries do this. We have plans for war with lots of countries, which we'll never use of course."

Clearly, however, the Australian defence establishment was not making plans in the abstract, but was also issuing recommendations to provide the necessary military forces to carry them out. According to the *Australian*, the section of the 2009 White Paper that planned an invasion of PNG also reviewed the “logistical challenge” of getting enough Australian troops into Port Moresby to evacuate Australian nationals and to “secure the PNG government.”

In the case of Fiji, military planners assessed “the role of Australia’s amphibious ships, the number of troops needed for the task, the urgent priority of evacuating Australians and the potential resistance or other actions of the Fijian military.”

Immediately prior to the December 2006 military coup, the Australian government deployed naval warships just off the Fijian coast in a provocative effort to assert its interests amid a deepening political crisis in Suva. Just days before the Fijian military seized control, an Australian Blackhawk helicopter crashed into the back of a ship that it was attempting to land on, killing two elite SAS personnel. Other SAS forces were rumoured to have been covertly placed in the Australian High Commission. A full intervention was never ordered, despite pleas from the deposed Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, in part due to concerns that Australian forces would suffer significant casualties.

Fiji’s acting prime minister, Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, stated on Monday that he was “not necessarily surprised” by the revelations of Australian plans to invade the island, given the tensions that have existed since 2006. Australia, he declared, “sees itself as the big brother of the South Pacific.” Khaiyum condemned Canberra’s “pontificating” to Fiji’s establishment.

Preparations for interventions in the South Pacific—whether in PNG, Fiji or other small island states—are a critical aspect of a restructuring taking place within the Australian military. Over the next two years, the Australian Navy will commission two Landing Helicopter Docks (LHDs). The LHDs, which are effectively small aircraft carriers, will be the Australian military’s largest ever ships. Each will be

capable of carrying some 1,000 troops, tanks, armoured vehicles, landing craft, helicopters and potentially vertical take-off jet fighters.

In addition, army units have been re-classified as “marines” and are currently training with US Marines in amphibious operations as part of the US-Australian agreement last November to provide American access to Australian bases. Australian troops and federal police paramilitary units have already been involved in military occupations of East Timor and the Solomon Islands, as well as in the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The decision to base US Marines in Darwin as part of last November’s deal has another motivation. By itself, the Australian military would be stretched to even control the Fijian capital of Suva, especially if the Fijian military resisted. Any intervention would require substantial US support, as was the case during the 1999 Australian-led occupation of East Timor. The presence of 2,500 US Marines in Darwin by 2017 and associated logistical support could provide assistance to any Australian intervention.

The latest revelations surrounding the 2009 White Paper underscore the advanced preparations by both the US and Australian governments for conflict and war in the Asia-Pacific region.



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