

US report proposes aircraft carrier base in Western Australia

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A recently published review of US military deployments by a prominent Washington think tank has brought into sharp focus the ramifications of the Australian government's unconditional support for the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot" against China in the Asia-Pacific.

Australia figured prominently in the changes suggested by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to the US posture in the region. The most dramatic proposal is to relocate an aircraft carrier battle group from the American Atlantic coast to HMAS Stirling, an Indian Ocean naval base near Perth, the state capital of Western Australia (WA).

In March, the US Defense Department commissioned the CSIS to study how the US military would implement the Obama administration's decision to concentrate 60 percent of its global naval power in Asia. Published on June 27, the report spelt out Washington's motives, declaring that "the most significant problem for the United States in Asia today is China's rising power, influence, and expectations of regional pre-eminence." The review did not prompt media comment until this week, when its authors summarised their findings before the US Congress Armed Services Committee.

As well as basing a battle group at Perth, the CSIS had other suggestions: upgrading and expanding military airfields in WA to better service US bombers and other aircraft; increasing the number of US marines to be based in the northern city of Darwin by 2016 beyond the previously announced 2,500 troops; and developing a key base for US aerial surveillance on the Cocos Islands, an Australian territory in the Indian

Ocean.

The CSIS also proposed that the US military assist the Australian government to replace its trouble-plagued Collins class conventional submarines. Washington has already indicated its readiness to sell or lease American nuclear-powered submarines to Australia to boost its naval war-fighting capabilities.

The CSIS review stated: "Southeast Asia, the South China Sea in particular, is becoming more central to US interests, and Australia's geostrategic location remains vital in this context, as it was during World War II. The Indian Ocean is also becoming more important, particularly because of the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that run through it and the choke points around its perimeter (i.e., the Strait of Hormuz, the Mozambique Channel, and the Malacca Straits), and again Australia's location proves relevant given the US commitment to preserving freedom of navigation and maritime security throughout the region." The reference to "freedom of navigation" in fact means maintaining US naval dominance in the region.

The HMAS Stirling base near Perth, the review stated, "offers advantages including direct blue water access to the Indian Ocean ... submarine facilities ... and space for expanded surface ship facilities, including potentially a dock capable of supporting aircraft carriers."

Basing an aircraft carrier battle group in Australia would require the US administration to make the politically-charged decision to effectively close a major naval facility on the American east coast. Perth would host not only a nuclear-armed and powered aircraft carrier, but also jet fighters and other aircraft, up to six

frigates and destroyers, several nuclear submarines, supply and logistical vessels and potentially tens of thousands of American military personnel. The city would become a prime nuclear target in any war with China.

The think tank effectively ruled out stationing such a US force in South East Asia or India because of likely opposition there, due to concerns over “sovereignty” or damage to economic relations with China. But there was only a “risk” of such obstacles in Australia. Summing up Australian imperialism’s historic dependence on a major ally, the CSIS wrote: “Australia’s strategic history is one of close alignment with a ‘great and powerful friend,’ first Britain and for the past 60 years the United States.”

An Australian base was “militarily and/or diplomatically feasible,” with the estimated cost of upgrading HMAS Stirling ranging from \$US1 billion to \$6.5 billion. The base would need facilities to maintain ships’ nuclear reactors and store nuclear fuel. The CSIS review was vague as to whether the US or Australia would pay the costs.

Taken as a whole, the CSIS recommendations show that US strategists view northern and western Australia as a crucial staging ground for potential conflicts with China, with the Australian military as a pivotal junior partner. Naval, air and marine forces deployed from Australia could be used to threaten Chinese access to critical sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, through which the bulk of China’s energy imports and trade are shipped.

Chinese commentators denounced the CSIS proposals as part of an escalating US military build-up against Beijing. Sun Zhe, the director of Tsinghua University’s Centre for China-US Relations, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the review “would be interpreted ... as another move to encircle China”.

Song Xiaojun, the editor of *Naval and Merchant Ships* magazine, told the newspaper that Canberra’s alignment with the US could see China end its massive purchases of Australian iron ore and other natural resources—much of it from Western Australia.

Colin Barnett, the Liberal premier of Western Australia, displayed acute sensitivity to any threat to the state’s booming mining industry. “I don’t think there’s any possibility” of an aircraft carrier battle group being based near Perth, he declared, claiming that the port was too small to accommodate such a major force.

Barnett’s comments reflect broader concerns within sections of the Australian political establishment that support for Obama’s “pivot” to Asia will have heavy economic costs. An editorial in today’s *Age* newspaper declared: “Australia has been a faithful ally to the US—arguably blindly faithful—and should not have to compromise its interests any further to prove its commitment. Chinese analysts leave no room for doubt about the likely response to a US naval base in Australia. China would flex its economic muscles in retaliation—and strategically, too, Beijing would have to rethink the reliance on Australian resources.”

Defence Minister Stephen Smith, however, stressed on Wednesday that the federal Labor government supported greater US use of HMAS Stirling and other Australian facilities. He stated that a greater American presence would “support our long-held strategic interests in maintaining and expanding US engagement in our region.”

Despite its economic dependence on China, the Australian ruling class fears Beijing’s growing regional influence and remains strategically reliant on the US. Amid rising tensions, the Labor government, reflecting the dominant view in ruling circles, has fully aligned with Washington’s increasingly naked preparations for a military confrontation that would have potentially devastating consequences for the working class in Australia, Asia and internationally.



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