US think tank plans military build-up against China

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A paper by the Washington think tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), entitled "US Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment," provides what amounts to a blueprint for the Obama administration's military preparations for conflict with China.

While the CSIS is a non-government body, its assessment was commissioned by the US Defense Department, as required by the 2012 National Defense Authorisation Act, giving semi-official status to its findings and proposals. The paper involved extensive discussions with top US military personnel throughout the Pentagon's Pacific Command. The CSIS report was delivered to the Pentagon on June 27, but gained media coverage only after its principal authors—David Berteau and Michael Green—testified before the US House Armed Services Committee on August 1.

The report featured prominently in the Australian media, which headlined one of its proposals: to forward base an entire US aircraft carrier battle group at HMAS Stirling, a naval base in Western Australia. If implemented, the recommendation would transform the base, and the nearby city of Perth, into a potential target for Chinese and Russian nuclear missiles. The proposal serves to underscore the far-reaching implications of the CSIS assessment, which is in line with Obama administration's confrontational "pivot" to Asia, aimed against China.

The CSIS assessment declares that the underlying US geostrategic objective in the Asia-Pacific region has been to prevent "the rise of any hegemonic state from within the region that could threaten US interests by seeking to obstruct American access or dominate the maritime domain. From that perspective, the most significant problem for the United States in Asia today is China's rising power, influence, and expectations of regional pre-eminence." In other words, the prevailing American hegemony in the region must continue.

The document recognises that military strategy is bound up with economic imperatives. It identifies "trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement" as crucial to "a sustainable trans-Pacific trade architecture that sustains U.S. access and influence in the region." While declaring that the US "must integrate all of these instruments of national power and not rely excessively on US military capabilities," it is precisely America's relative economic decline that is driving the use of military power to maintain its dominance in Asia, as in the Middle East.

Having identified China as the chief potential rival, the report rules out any repeat of the US containment strategy employed to isolate the Soviet Union during the Cold War—thus pointing to the United States' economic dependence on China. Significantly, the authors reject a power-sharing arrangement with China, or, as described to the armed services committee, "a bipolar condominium that acknowledges Beijing's core interests and implicitly divides the region." This latter conception, in one form or another, is being promoted by some strategic analysts in the US and Australia as the only means of preventing war. The CSIS report rejects any pull back by the US from Asia, which would effectively cede the region to China.

Having ruled out peaceful alternatives, the CSIS paper sets out a military strategy. The authors do not openly advocate war with China, declaring that "the consequences of conflict with that nation are almost unthinkable and should be avoided to the greatest extent possible, consistent with U.S. interests." They do not exclude the possibility of conflict in the event that US interests are at stake, however, adding that the ability to "maintain a favourable peace" depends on the perception that the US can prevail in the event of conflict. "U.S. force posture must demonstrate a readiness and capacity to fight and win, even under more challenging circumstances associated with A2AD [anti-access/area denial] and other threats to U.S. military operations in the

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Western Pacific," the report states.

Thus, in the name of peace, the US is preparing for a catastrophic war with China. US strategic planners are especially concerned with China's so-called A2AD military capacities—the development of sophisticated submarines, missiles and war planes capable of posing a danger to the US navy in the Western Pacific. While the US habitually presents such weaponry as a "threat" to its military, in reality China is defensively responding to the presence of overwhelming American naval power in waters close to the mainland. US naval preponderance in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and key "choke" points such as the Malacca Strait, menaces the shipping lanes from the Middle East and Africa on which China relies for energy and raw materials.

The CSIS report approves of the repositioning and strengthening of US military forces in the Western Pacific that has accelerated under the Obama administration's "rebalance" to Asia. This includes: consolidating US bases, troops and military assets in Japan and South Korea; building up US forces on Guam and Northern Mariana Islands, strategically located in the Western Pacific; stationing in Singapore littoral combat ships—relatively small, fast, flexible warships capable of intelligence gathering, special operations and landing troops with armoured vehicles; and making greater use of Australian naval and air bases and positioning 2,500 Marines in the northern city of Darwin. In addition, the paper confirms that the US has held discussions with Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam over possible access to bases and joint training.

The document also reviews US efforts to strengthen military ties throughout Asia—from India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to Burma, Indonesia and New Zealand—as well as with its formal allies. Significantly, in ranking military contingencies from low to high intensity, it identifies Australia, Japan and South Korea as critical allies "at the higher spectrum of intensity"—in other words, military conflict with China—"with other allies and partners at the lower spectrum of intensity."

While broadly dealing with all contingencies, the CSIS assessment is primarily focussed on "high intensity." Its recommendations involve the further development of military arrangements with South Korea, Japan and Australia, and also between these allies. It recommends the implementation of the latest military agreements with Japan and South Korea. In relation to Japan, the document makes the strategic significance of Okinawa clear. It is "centrally located" between Northeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, and "positioned to fight tactically within the A2AD envelope in higher intensity scenarios"—that is, it is crucial in any war with China. The Obama administration has intransigently opposed Japanese government calls to relocate the large US Marine base at Futenma off Okinawa.

The CSIS document is not the official policy of the Obama administration: its findings are couched as recommendations. It considers all scenarios, including maintaining the status quo and winding back US forces from the Asia Pacific region, neither of which it favours. However, the most ominous aspect of the report deals with a substantial list of steps that could be taken to markedly strengthen the US military throughout the region.

As well as basing a US nuclear aircraft carrier in Western Australia, these include: doubling the number of nuclear attack submarines based at Guam; deploying littoral combat ships to South Korea; doubling the size of amphibious forces in Hawaii; permanently basing a bomber squadron on Guam; boosting manned and unmanned surveillance assets in Australia or Guam; upgrading anti-missile defences in Japan, South Korea and Guam; and strengthening US ground forces. While recommending consideration of all these options, the CSIS specifically calls for more attack submarines to be placed at Guam—that is, within easy striking distance of Chinese shipping routes and naval bases.

Any of these moves will only heighten tensions with China and the danger of an arms race and conflict in the Asia Pacific region. The CSIS assessment points to potential flashpoints, from the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait to the South China Sea and the disputed borders between India and China. The report clearly represents the thinking more broadly within the Obama administration, and top US military and intelligence circles that are recklessly preparing and planning for war with China.

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