

Renewed US pressure for increased Australian military spending

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6 April 2013

Just six weeks before the Australian Labor government's 2013 budget is released, the *Australian* newspaper aired again this week Washington's insistence that the government match its support for the US "pivot" against China in the Asia-Pacific with a substantial increase in military spending.

On April 2, the paper published an opinion piece by Peter Jennings, a former high-ranking Defence Department official and now the executive director of the state-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Headlined "Military ties that bind us," the column began by noting that Australian officers were recently appointed to two senior posts within the US military's Pacific Area Command (PACOM), which is responsible for the Indian and Pacific Oceans and more than 320,000 American troops. One of the positions now held by an Australian officer is deputy of PACOM intelligence, placing Canberra at the very centre of the current military build-up against North Korea, and contingency plans for war with China.

The PACOM appointments reflect the extent to which the Australian military has been integrated into the American military apparatus in the Asia-Pacific region. Dozens of lower-ranking Australian personnel work on a day-to-day basis at some level of US strategic and tactical planning. This includes plotting the scenarios in which Australian forces and bases could be used to blockade the key shipping lanes through South East Asia, on which China relies for energy and raw materials imported from the Middle East and Africa.

In November 2011, Prime Minister Julia Gillard agreed to a deal with Obama to make Australia a staging base for US operations in the Asia-Pacific. Jennings noted that the "price of closeness" was "higher American expectations of what capabilities we

will bring to the defence table." In other words, the alignment with Washington means more must be spent on military hardware and on upgrading or constructing air and naval bases for the US military to use in the north and west of Australia.

Referring to Jennings's column, the *Australian*'s defence editor, Brendan Nicholson, claimed on April 2 that there was "concern" in the US that the Gillard government's "enthusiasm" for basing American marines in Darwin was "cooling." He cited a US official, who told a congressional hearing last year: "As yet we do not know the extent of the infrastructure needed or required for our presence [of marines] and what Australia has to offer, and *what we are looking to do*." [Emphasis added]

The agreement for an eventual force of 2,500 US marines to train in Darwin for six months each year is part of a far greater use of Australian territory by the American military. This includes the development of air bases, ports, supply bases and other logistical facilities, not only in Darwin, but other strategic locations. The US Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has already nominated Perth, the Western Australian state capital, as a potential base for an aircraft carrier battle group, and the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean as a base for surveillance drones monitoring the sea lanes. Towns in north-western Australia were suggested as possible bases for long-range aircraft. To implement all the CSIS recommendations would cost billions of dollars.

The latest articles in the *Australian* are part of an ongoing campaign by the Murdoch media to press for greater defence spending to meet Washington's demands. With the Gillard government under pressure from big business to slash public spending, Washington is insisting that military outlays must be raised. The

military expansion will have to be paid for at the expense of the living standards of the working class.

The Labor government has provided repeated reassurances that it is marching in lockstep with Washington. In a “national security” speech on January 23, Gillard pledged that “our level of defence expenditure will ensure that Australia remains one of the top 15 nations for absolute defence spending”—effectively ruling out any reductions in the May budget and committing to future increases. A number of multi-billion dollar purchases are proceeding, including new naval ships and jet fighters, as well as plans for a new submarine fleet. The estimated cost of planned purchases over the next decade-and-a-half is upwards of \$150 billion.

The quandary confronting the Gillard government, and American allies throughout the region, is that the US “pivot” has led to a rapid escalation in geo-political tensions. Barely 18 months after Obama announced the US focus on the Asia-Pacific, the Korean peninsula has been brought to the brink of war, while relations between China and a number of countries, including Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and India, have sharply deteriorated because of territorial disputes egged on by Washington.

Any conflict with Beijing in which US forces became involved would immediately draw in Australia, and the US bases on the continent—regardless of Australia’s economic dependence on trade with China. Australian imperialism, a second-order power with limited military and economic clout, remains reliant on its alliance with the US to assert its strategic and corporate interests internationally, particularly in South East Asia and the South Pacific.

The preparations for war underway mean that whichever of the major parties—Labor or the Liberal-National coalition—wins the election scheduled for September 14, the next Australian government will accelerate military spending, at the cost of the working class.



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