Australian warship to join US fleet off Korean peninsula

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3 May 2013

The Australian guided-missile frigate HMAS Sydney has been dispatched to join the American Seventh Fleet in Japan. For three months it will be "embedded" with the naval battle group escorting the aircraft carrier USS George Washington. The warship will take part in exercises and operations near the tense Korean Peninsula and the Senkaku Islands, which are the subject of a bitter territorial dispute between China and Japan.

The Obama administration has vowed that South Korea will have the full support of US military forces, including the Seventh Fleet, in the event of a clash with North Korea—which has historically been propped up by China as a strategic buffer against the US.

As a result, the Australian Labor government, behind the backs of the Australian population and with no public debate, has established a situation where a US decision to attack North Korea would immediately involve Australian military forces. Peter Jennings, the head of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, told the *Australian* that "[HMAS Sydney] would have a role to play in a conflict if that happened." Jennings also noted that because the warship would be based in Japan, it signalled that the Australian military was also "getting close to the Japanese" amid Tokyo's tensions with China.

The government's decision to place a warship at the centre of some of the region's most volatile flashpoints is in line with its unwavering support for the US "pivot" to Asia to contain China. As well as providing bases for US forces in Australia, it is presiding over the integration of the Australian armed forces into the day-to-day operations of the US military.

Already 1,550 Australian troops are taking part in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and an Australian frigate is on permanent deployment in the Persian Gulf alongside US naval forces. Less well known is the fact that the Pine Gap satellite base in the Northern Territory is a critical intelligence gathering facility for the US military, and that hundreds of Australian military personnel are embedded with, and under the command of, US forces in various parts of the world.

At least 12 Australians, for example, work in the headquarters of US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees Afghanistan operations and the planning for interventions into Syria and war on Iran. Pacific Area Command (PACOM) headquarters is staffed by at least 33 Australian personnel, including Major General Rick Burr, the former commander of Australian forces in Afghanistan. In November 2012, Burr became the first non-American to be appointed by the US government to the high-level post of Deputy Commanding General for Operations for the US Army in the Pacific.

The deployment of HMAS Sydney to Japan follows the dispatch of 18 Australian troops to take part in this year's joint US-South Korean "Foal Eagle" two-month-long military exercises, which finished on April 30. The annual display of military might by the US and South Korea took place amid their provocative escalation of tensions with the North Korean regime, following its nuclear test in February. The rhetorical counter-threats by the North have been exploited by Washington to justify the expansion of US, Japanese and South Korea anti-missile shields in the region, which are above all intended to counter China's nuclear capabilities.

While the small Australian involvement in Foal Eagle could be dismissed as largely symbolic, it was unprecedented. Australia and other countries have sent observers to previous exercises, but they have never before been permitted to participate. The Gillard

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government requested that they be allowed to do this year, so that Australian personnel could “gain experience in joint military exercises” with US and South Korean forces on the Peninsula.

Earlier in February, the Royal Australian Air Force participated in the Cope North 2013 training exercises in Guam. The sizable Australian contingent included seven F/A-18A fighter jets, an E-7A Wedgetail early-warning aircraft, refuelling and transport aircraft and 230 support personnel.

Cope North began in 1978 as a joint US-Japanese operation designed to improve air force co-ordination. It is now developing as a key training exercise for the air forces of the countries that comprise the de facto US coalition against China. Australia participated for the first time in 2012 and South Korea took part with a limited presence this year. US Pacific Air Force commander, General Herbert Carlisle, has indicated that New Zealand and the Philippines will most likely participate in the future.

The exercises represented a further development in the military relations between Australia and Japan. The Obama administration has been pushing for the two countries to forge closer military links. A study published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute referred to them as the “northern” and “southern anchors” of the US military’s AirSea Battle strategy and detailed how they would play pivotal roles in a war with China. Japan would be launching pad for direct attacks on the Chinese mainland, while Australia would serve as the base of operations for naval and air operations to blockade the trade routes through Indonesia, cutting off China’s access to energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

In July, the biennial “Talisman Sabre” joint exercises between Australian and American military forces will take place in Queensland. Begun in 2005, this year’s exercises are expected to involve up to 23,000 personnel and an array of aircraft and naval vessels rehearsing for a conflict with a “fictional” enemy. In reality, the unstated focus of the military training and preparations is for conflict with China.

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