

Australian Defence White Paper commits to US “pivot”

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The Australian Defence White Paper released on May 3 codifies the federal Labor government’s support for the Obama administration’s “pivot” to undermine Chinese influence in Asia and around the world. While the document asserts that the Australian government “does not approach China as an adversary,” its focus, along with the outlined military initiatives and arms purchases, are all aimed at providing unconditional backing to Washington as it intensifies pressure on Beijing and prepares for a military confrontation.

No-one in Chinese political or military circles would be fooled by the White Paper’s platitudes about “encouraging China’s peaceful rise and ensuring that strategic competition in the region does not lead to conflict.” Such language was included primarily for domestic consumption in Australia. It was seized on by the establishment media to throw dust in the eyes of the Australian public and downplay the war dangers that are developing as a result of US policy in Asia.

The actual content of the White Paper is embodied in the redefinition of the Australian military’s area of operational focus as the “Indo Pacific”—spelt out as “the arc extending from India through Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia, including the sea lines of communication on which the region depends.”

The “Indo Pacific” concept comes directly from the Pentagon and US State Department. In an essay published just before President Obama’s visit to Australia in November 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted that the US was “expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo Pacific one.”

In his 2011 speech to the Australian parliament, Obama spelled out the determination of the US to remain the dominant power in the Asian region throughout an ongoing military restructuring and build-

up. China was the unmistakable target. Obama and Gillard jointly announced that a 2,500-strong Marine Air Ground Task Force would operate from Darwin by 2016-17, and that American warships and aircraft would make greater use of facilities in western and northern Australia.

The expanded basing arrangements were inseparable from US and Australian strategic planning for Australia to become the launching pad for a blockade of Chinese shipping routes across the Indo-Pacific in the event of a conflict. To the north and west of Australia are crucial “chokepoints”—the Malacca, Lombok and Sunda straits—through which passes the bulk of China’s energy supplies, and other raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

The 2013 White Paper is predicated on active involvement alongside US forces in a war with China. The dangers of such a conflict have been dramatically heightened over the past 18 months, with Washington tacitly supporting the Philippines and Japan in their territorial disputes with China over island groups in the South China and East China seas, and stoking tensions with the North Korean regime.

The White Paper has incorporated the major recommendations regarding Australia that were made in a study undertaken for the US Defense Department by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in 2012.

The CSIS advocated that Australia’s Cocos Island territory in the Indian Ocean be developed as a base for American drone aircraft. The White Paper outlines the concrete plans to upgrade the airbase on the Cocos Islands for use by “maritime surveillance aircraft.”

The CSIS paper suggested that Port Stirling, near Perth, be transformed into a base for an entire US Navy aircraft carrier battle group. The White Paper indicates

that discussions are underway between Canberra and Washington to give the US military greater access to the Western Australian base.

A press release issued by Prime Minister Julia Gillard bluntly stated: “The 2013 Defence White Paper highlights that Australia’s Alliance with the United States continues to be the bedrock of Australia’s defence, security, and strategic arrangements.”

The document asserts, under a heading “Contributing to military contingencies in the Indo-Pacific,” that Australian forces need to be capable of being deployed to meet “alliance commitments to the United States” and that “Australia should be prepared to make substantial contributions if necessary.”

The White Paper outlines arms purchases to allow for the greater integration of the Australian armed forces into the operations of the US military. Gillard has maintained the commitment of the 2009 White Paper to spend tens of billions of dollars over the next two decades to acquire amphibious troop carriers, new destroyers, 12 new long-range submarines, three squadrons of US-built Joint Strike Fighters (JSFs) and an array of other aircraft and equipment that would complement US forces in a clash with China.

The Labor government met the US demands—voiced publicly by figures such as Republican Senator John McCain—not to reduce military spending in this month’s upcoming budget. While a raft of social programs and welfare are being targeted for savage cutbacks, defence expenditure will be increased. The White Paper declares that Labor’s aspiration is raise the military budget to 2 percent of gross domestic product, from its current level of 1.6 percent.

Immediately, to offset the delay in delivery of the trouble-plagued JSFs, the White Paper commits to purchasing 12 new EA-18G Growler electronic attack aircraft for up to \$2.5 billion. The Growlers are fitted with equipment that can disable missile defence and communications systems. Underscoring the determination of Washington to build up Australian capabilities, Australia will be the only country apart from the US to possess these aircraft.

Rory Metcalf, director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute, a strategic think tank, commented in today’s *Australian Financial Review*: “Canberra’s revised strategic policy is not as meek as it seems about the risk of trouble with China. Its most

telling line is not to be found in all the comforting talk about co-operation, multilateralism and a peaceful Asian century. Buried in all that sweetness, it says plainly that Australia may need to be prepared ‘to conduct conventional combat operations to counter aggression or coercion against our partners’.”

Metcalf noted that while such a clause could “mean many things,” it included the “possibility, however remote, of joining a US-led war on China.”

In fact, under conditions of rising regional tensions, the risk of a miscalculation or relatively minor incident leading to the outbreak of hostilities is far from remote. The White Paper itself, and the almost universal media silence about its real content and implications, underscores the extent of the lies being told to the working class of Australia and the entire region about the dangers they confront.



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