

Australia's Defence White Paper and the US “pivot” to Asia

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The 2013 Defence White Paper, which defines the Australian government's strategic military orientation, codifies its unconditional support for the Obama administration's “pivot” to Asia. The document asserts that “the relationship between the United States and China will determine the outlook for our region”, over the coming decades, and foreshadows that Australia will serve as the military adjunct and physical base for US efforts to dominate the entire “Indo-Pacific”. It stresses the importance of collaboration with the US, as well as states such as India, in controlling the key maritime trade passages between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The unstated purpose of both US and Australian policy is to threaten China with an economic blockade and military confrontation on a range of issues, from the status of Taiwan, to territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas. US imperialism, which is undergoing a historic economic decline, is determined to prevent China's economic and military expansion from enabling Beijing to supplant Washington as the dominant power in Asia since the end of World War II.

Seeming to contradict such an assessment, the Australian White Paper asserts that the “government does not approach China as an adversary”. It declares that Australia “welcomes” the rise of China and insists that “the most likely future,” is one where Washington and Beijing “are able to maintain a constructive relationship”.

Much of the commentary in the establishment media has focussed on this language, summed up in headlines such as “Defence paper softens Australia's China stance”. A less optimistic appraisal was made in the previous 2009 White Paper. Authored amid the economic fall-out from the global financial crisis, that document openly expressed fears within the Australian

ruling class that China's rise posed the danger of war.

China, the 2009 paper emphasised, would emerge by 2030 not only as the world's largest economy but “the strongest Asian military power”. There was, it declared, a “small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation” between China, Russia, India, Japan and the US, as they competed in the vacuum left by the wane of American influence. It warned of the possibility of “high-intensity wars among the major powers”, and labelled China's military expansion as a “potential cause for concern”—a formulation that provoked protests from the Chinese regime on the basis that it defined China as a threat.

The 2009 document reflected the foreign policy stance of then prime minister, Kevin Rudd. Rudd had championed the view—shared in some strategic circles internationally—that Washington could not contain China's rise and therefore had to accommodate to its ambitions in order to avoid conflict. The frank contemplation of the possibility of war, which was allegedly inserted into the White Paper against the advice of Australian and American intelligence agencies, was intended to force discussion on Rudd's calls for an “Asia Pacific Community”, which would work to mediate and reconcile US-China tensions. In June 2008, his proposal of such a forum had already been rejected by the US and other regional states.

Rudd's stance embodied the fundamental dilemma confronting the Australian ruling class. Since World War II, Australian imperialism has been completely dependent on its alliance with the US to assert its strategic interests in the South Pacific, South East Asia and on the world arena. During the past decade, this strategic alliance has prompted attempts by Canberra to counter China's efforts to develop its own influence in the region. At the same time, however, China has

become Australia's largest export market and trading partner, and a major source of investment.

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Chinese demand for resources has been the primary factor shoring up economic activity in Australia. Rudd's "Asia-Pacific Community" proposal articulated the concerns of significant sections of the corporate elite and political establishment that any disruption in relations, which would compel them to support their US ally against China, would be devastating to their economic and financial interests.

The new 2013 White Paper is a product of the realignment of political forces in the Asia-Pacific that has been engineered by Obama's "pivot". Across the region, Washington has, through various intrigues, enlisted country after country into what amount to preparations for war with China. The entire process has taken place behind the backs of the masses of people throughout the region, and with next to no public discussion on its potentially catastrophic implications.

In 2010, these intrigues took the form in Australia of moves by the most pro-US factions of the establishment to undermine Rudd and oust him as prime minister. Washington views Australia as a crucial staging base in its anti-China pivot and is not prepared to allow any Australian government to vacillate on the implementation of this agenda. On June 23-24, 2010, powerbrokers within the Labor Party and the trade unions, who have since been exposed by WikiLeaks as "protected sources" of the US embassy, carried out a political coup. Overnight, Rudd was replaced by his deputy Julia Gillard. John Faulkner, Rudd's defence minister, resigned within days.

Over the ensuing three years, the Gillard Labor government, with the full support of the opposition parties, including the Greens, has provided unconditional backing to US policy. In November 2011, Obama used his visit to Australia to formally announce the "pivot", including the stationing of US Marines in Darwin and plans for other bases.

The 2013 White Paper embodies the precarious balancing act being performed by Australian imperialism. Lacking any alternative, the Gillard government is energetically seeking to expand trade relations with China, such as the March agreement for the convertibility of the Australian and Chinese currencies. Its foreign and strategic policy, however,

echoes Washington's insistence that China abide by a US-dictated "regional security order," and is premised on preparing to fight alongside the US in any confrontation—while publicly issuing reassurances that no hostilities are being contemplated. A more diplomatic posture toward Beijing is being combined with changes in military deployments, arms purchases and basing arrangements that are completely in line with US preparations for war against China.

The entire Australian political and media establishment is collaborating in this conspiracy of lies and diplomatic double talk, blinding the populations of Australia, the US, and the region to the fact that they are being embroiled in the drive to a war with catastrophic implications.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in the 2013 Australian election in order to expose this conspiracy and tell the working class the truth. The SEP's Election 2013 campaign is part of the fight being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, among workers and youth around the world, for a broad antiwar movement, aimed at preventing the breakdown of the capitalist system from dragging humanity into an abyss of war between nuclear-armed states. Such a movement must be based on a socialist and internationalist perspective for the overthrow of capitalism, the system responsible for war, and the establishment of world socialism. Workers and young people in Australia and internationally should support and participate in this campaign.



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