

Australian ruling elite prepares further military interventions into South Pacific

Patrick O'Connor—SEP candidate for the Senate in Victoria
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The Socialist Equality Party condemns the Labor government's plans to step up the militarisation of the South Pacific, as revealed in its Defence White Paper this month, and warns workers and young people in Australia and the region that a new round of predatory interventions is being prepared.

The White Paper, the policy document that outlines Canberra's current strategic and military agenda, underscores the extent to which Australian imperialism is committed to Washington's so-called "pivot" to East Asia and the Pacific. The Obama administration is provocatively encircling and preparing for war against China in a bid to maintain Washington's strategic domination over the entire region.

One little noted aspect of the new White Paper is its focus on preparing for stepped up Australian military activity in the South Pacific.

The region has emerged as an important theatre in the US-Australian campaign of confrontation with Beijing. US imperialism aims to ensure that the entire Pacific Ocean remains an "American lake", as it was characterised in the aftermath of World War II. Washington's junior allies in Australia and New Zealand are being delegated responsibility for shutting out rival powers from developing ties with states in Melanesia and Polynesia. Australian imperialism is completely dependent on US backing for its own predatory operations in the region, and has lent support to US-led military aggression throughout the world in order to secure that backing.

The 2013 White Paper defines Canberra's most important strategic interest, after maintaining the military defence of Australia, as establishing a "secure" South Pacific and East Timor. "Australia seeks to ensure that our neighbourhood does not become a source of threat to Australia and that no major power with hostile intentions establishes bases in our immediate neighbourhood from which it could project force against us," the document declares.

This potential "major power" is, unsurprisingly, not identified anywhere in the document, but China is the main target.

As it has done in Latin America, Africa, and other regions, Beijing has actively promoted economic, diplomatic, and military relations in the South Pacific. Governments in some of the small Pacific states have been able to utilise Chinese

patronage to offset Australia's historically dominant influence. The Fijian military government, for example, has defied Canberra's diktats and diplomatic sanctions for more than five years, utilising Chinese loans, economic investment, and military ties to prop up its rule. In Washington and Canberra, these developments have raised the spectre of a Chinese military presence in the South Pacific as part its development of a "blue water" navy.

There are also more immediate economic calculations. These were bluntly spelled out in 2011 by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, when she informed a Congressional committee about American interests in Papua New Guinea (PNG). "Let's put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in, and let's just talk, you know, straight realpolitik. We are in a competition with China... Exxon Mobil is producing it [a \$19 billion gas project in PNG]. China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it's going to come in behind us, come in under us."

Australia's 2013 White Paper bluntly explains that "Australia's national interests extend beyond our geographic boundaries" and includes the "welfare of Australian businesses overseas". These business interests in the Pacific include significant mining and energy operations, particularly in the former Australian colony of PNG.

The White Paper makes clear that the current drawdown of Australian troops from interventions in the Solomon Islands and East Timor marks no retreat. On the contrary, the military is now being equipped to more efficiently carry out the kind of operations that Canberra launched with US backing in Timor in 1999 and 2006 and the Solomons in 2003. "Within our near neighbourhood, the ADF [Australian Defence Force] must be very active in its regional engagement and activities to help our regional security environment," the document explains.

The previous White Paper, released in 2009, included secret sections, the existence of which was only leaked to the media years later. These sections outlined detailed plans for Australian-led invasions of Fiji and Papua New Guinea. The latest policy document has no doubt updated these classified contingency plans, and expanded them to cover other potential targets.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has recently unveiled new military capacities to bolster future

operations in the region. The ADF is being equipped with new amphibious equipment, including two Landing Helicopter Dock ships, the largest ever operated by the Australian military. The equipment will significantly lessen Canberra's dependence on US supplies and logistics support, which proved vital for its previous interventions, including the 1999 deployment to East Timor.

Australia's military buildup in the region is being accompanied by more frequent defence discussions with nearby governments and military exercises in the Pacific. This week, the US, Australia, and New Zealand led a joint naval exercise in the region based around an intervention into a hypothetical Pacific country suffering a "humanitarian crisis".

Australian imperialism has long cloaked itself in the banner of "humanitarianism" within the South Pacific. In this, it has followed the lead of Washington, which has waged a series of illegal neo-colonial wars around the world during the last two decades, most recently in Libya, under the bogus guise of preventing civilian deaths and helping vulnerable people.

The Australian government's intervention into East Timor in 1999 was publicly defended on the basis of saving civilians' lives, as a fraudulent cover for its real mercenary calculations, which centred on Canberra's determination to maintain its illegal hold over the lucrative oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. In the Solomon Islands, "humanitarianism" has provided the pretext for a decade-long Australian-led occupation of the country and takeover of its state apparatus. In both the Solomons and East Timor, Canberra has maintained its dominance through countless provocations and dirty tricks, including regime-change operations that it launched in both countries in 2006.

The entire political establishment in Australia is complicit. There are no policy differences regarding the South Pacific between the Labor and Liberal parties. For their part, the Greens are the most enthusiastic proponents of Australian imperialist intervention in the region, lending their support to the government's bogus humanitarian rhetoric and urging wider interventions throughout the region.

The various middle class pseudo-left organisations also play an important role. The forces that now comprise Socialist Alliance made a vital contribution in 1999 to paving the way for the Timor intervention by organising "troops in" protests on behalf of the ruling elite. This episode marked an important turning point, and was followed by a significant expansion of the Australian military. The entire pseudo-left, including Socialist Alternative, has openly committed to imperialist politics. It remains complicit in the government's operations in Timor, the Solomons, and other impoverished countries in the region, while publicly supporting the criminal US-backed regime-change operations in Libya and Syria.

As for the Australian media, it functions as a nothing more than a propaganda adjunct of government policy in the Pacific. The ABC in particular has long played an active role in

agitating for regional interventions, and in backing Canberra's provocative ousting of governments that fail to toe the US-Australian line. The ABC's senior correspondent Michael Brissenden this month contributed alarmist reports from Tonga about China's growing influence. "According to one well-placed Australian official, 'the Yanks are worried' about China's growing economic engagement in the South Pacific—a region that for the most part has until fairly recently been firmly in what would be called America's and certainly Australia's sphere of influence," he declared.

The working class has a political responsibility to oppose the preparations being made by the Australian ruling elite for wider military intervention in the impoverished countries of the South Pacific. These operations form part of the wider drive by US and Australian imperialism to prepare for war against China, which would have devastating consequences for the entire region. Many of the bloodiest land and naval battles of World War II were fought in the Pacific. A conflict with China, almost inevitably involving the use of nuclear weapons, would be even more catastrophic.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the Australian federal election to mobilise the working class against this war threat on the basis of a socialist and internationalist strategy, uniting workers in Australia, China, the US, and internationally against capitalism and imperialism. Such a unified political movement of the working class must include the working class and oppressed masses of the South Pacific, and we urge those in the region who agree with the need to fight against imperialist war to contact the SEP and support our international campaign.

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