

West Australian base on frontline of US war preparations against China

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The Stirling naval base, located on Garden Island, just south of Perth, Western Australia's capital city has become a key focus of US military planning for a conflict with China.

HMAS Stirling is the Australian navy's major base on the Indian Ocean, home to the Australian submarine fleet and 2,500 naval personnel. It already hosts visits by US warships, and features maintenance and refitting capacities for warships and submarines, including industrial infrastructure in the surrounding area.

As part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia", the US is building up and restructuring its military forces throughout the region. Obama formally announced his "pivot", on the floor of the Australian parliament, in November 2011. He also signed an agreement with former Prime Minister Julia Gillard to establish a fully operational US Marine task force, backed by naval and air assets, in Darwin.

Since then, top-level discussions have been held about greater American access to military bases in northern and western Australia. The Pentagon views Stirling as particularly important because of its location and extensive existing facilities.

Senior military officials have visited the Stirling base, including US Navy Secretary Ray Marbus arrived in April 2012, followed by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (NATO), James Stavridis, an American admiral. In the same month, the chiefs of naval staff of Britain, a US ally, and India, an American strategic partner, also visited.

A *Washington Post* article previewing Marbus's trip explained that Pentagon officials were examining the location because "it could give the [US] Navy a sorely needed place to refuel, re-equip and repair ships on the Indian Ocean." A senior US defence official told the newspaper: "Australia is the only ally that we have on

the Indian Ocean." The US operates a key joint naval/air base on the British island territory of Diego Garcia, south of India, but the *Post* noted that operations are crowded and the US lease will expire in 2016.

US plans for the Stirling base were spelled out in a key report produced by the Washington think tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in June 2012. The report, which reviewed and outlined proposals for US military forces throughout the Indo-Pacific region, was commissioned by the US Defence Department, giving it a semi-official status.

The CSIS report explained that the Indian Ocean was important to US strategic planning, "particularly because of the sea lanes of communication that run through it and choke points around its perimeter." The Pentagon is determined to maintain control over these "choke points," especially through South East Asia, that are vital to China's supply of raw materials and energy from Africa and the Middle East.

In the section of the CSIS report dealing with Australia, the Stirling base featured prominently as a potential site for an entire US aircraft carrier battle group. It stated: "HMAS Stirling offers advantages, including direct blue water access to the Indian Ocean and to the extensive offshore West Australia Exercise Area and Underwater Tracking Range." Other advantages were "submarine facilities, including a heavyweight torpedo maintenance centre, and the only submarine escape training facility in the southern hemisphere." There was also "space for expanded surface ship facilities, including potentially a dock capable of supporting aircraft carriers."

While "further from trouble spots in the Western Pacific than Guam, and further from the Middle East than Diego Garcia," the base's location "is also an

advantage, however, in light of the growing coverage of Chinese A2AD missile capabilities.” A2AD refers to Chinese military capacities, including missiles, aimed at countering the US in areas near the Chinese mainland.

At this stage, the Labor government has given no commitment, publicly at least, to the transformation of Stirling into a major US naval base. In part that is due to the cost of upgrading the facilities to accommodate a fleet of American warships—estimated by the CSIS report at between \$US1 billion and \$US 6.5 billion. More fundamentally, however, the government fears the eruption of opposition to a base that would so obviously be part of US war plans against China.

The US demands, however, are unquestionably under discussion behind closed doors. In the lead-up to the annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultation (AUSMIN) last November, Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith noted that “the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is on the rise.” He added: “The enhanced importance of Stirling and its utility is to me something that will occur as sure as night follows day.”

The fact that the AUSMIN talks were held in Perth further underlines the high priority that the US places on the Indian Ocean in general, and the Stirling base in particular. In a speech at the University of Western Australia, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that Perth was “situated at a very strategic part of our planet, Australia’s gateway to the vibrant trade and energy routes that connect the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.” While in Western Australia, Clinton and then US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta toured the Stirling base with their Australian counterparts—Defence Minister Smith and Foreign Minister Bob Carr.

The integration of Australian sites such as Stirling, Darwin and the Cocos Islands into the Pentagon’s war plans, along with existing US bases, including Pine Gap in central Australia, places the Australian population on the frontline of a potential US conflict with China that would engulf the region and the world.

These war preparations will not be halted by protests or appeals to the Obama administration or the Rudd government. Amid the deepening breakdown of global capitalism, US imperialism is being driven to offset its historic economic decline by using its military might to maintain its dominant position against potential rivals,

above all China.

The SEP is intervening in the 2013 federal election campaign to build a unified, independent political movement of the working class in Australia, Asia and throughout the world directed at abolishing the root cause of militarism and war—the capitalist profit system. A workers’ government must be established to implement socialist policies, including the repudiation of the US alliance, the closure of all US military bases and the dismantling of the entire military apparatus of the Australian state.

I urge workers and youth across Australia to support the SEP’s election campaign, which is part of the struggle being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International to transform the widespread anti-war sentiments of workers and young people around the world into a conscious force fighting for the perspective of world socialism.

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