

US Navy to reinforce Marine taskforce in Australia

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The US Navy's strategic plan for building up naval forces in the Indo-Pacific region, as part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" aimed against China, was released last week. The *Australian* newspaper featured a front-page story yesterday highlighting the plan for a special naval task force to provide US Marines stationed in Darwin in northern Australia with "amphibious lift."

The centrality of Australia to US war plans against China was underscored by President Obama's decision to formally announce his "pivot" in the Australian parliament in November 2011. At the same time, he announced an agreement with former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard to base US Marines in Darwin. The number of Marines is due to expand from 250 to 1,150 next year and 2,500 in 2016.

Washington and Canberra have both been at pains to disguise the purpose of the deployment of US Marines, suggesting they could be used for humanitarian and other non-military purposes. However, US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, bluntly declared in his just-released "Navigation Plan 2014-2018" that his basic tenets were "warfighting first, operate forward and be ready."

Greenert added: "[The] Navy focuses in particular on deterring and defeating aggressors and assuring access by implementing the Air-Sea Battle concept." Air-Sea Battle refers to the Pentagon's strategy for a war against China through a devastating assault on Chinese command centres, communications, military bases and missiles, supplemented by a naval blockade of its key shipping lanes from the Middle East and Africa.

The stationing of US Marines in Darwin with the potential for deployment to South East Asia is to ensure continued US domination of key "choke points," such as the Malacca Straits, through which much of China's

shipping passes. The plans for a Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF), fully equipped with armoured vehicles and aircraft, had already been announced. Now Greenert's plan ensures the Marine force could be transported throughout the region "by establishing a fifth amphibious readiness group in the Pacific by financial year 2018."

Chris Westhoff, a US military attaché in Canberra, told the *Australian* that with naval support, the Marine task force in Darwin would constitute a fully-fledged Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) that would "leave a temporary and light footprint when partnering or conducting humanitarian operations or they can serve as an enabler for a larger joint forces effort." The mention of "larger joint forces" refers to the fact that in any conflict such a unit would operate with a full aircraft carrier battle group.

Lowy Institute analyst James Brown suggested that the new Pacific amphibious readiness group (ARG) would not be based in Darwin, but in Guam. Admiral Greenert, however, spelled out his plans at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) last month, declaring that US forces would expand "until we have a MEU-size force operating out of Darwin" by the end of the decade.

With two weeks to go in the Australian federal election campaign, the implications of the mounting US preparations for war against China throughout the region, including Darwin, are being systemically blocked out. Opposition defence spokesman David Johnston declared that the Coalition was "very supportive" of the US forces in Darwin, but neither Prime Minister Kevin Rudd nor Defence Minister Stephen Smith have commented.

Rudd was ousted as prime minister in 2010 by Julia Gillard in an inner-party coup orchestrated by Labor

and trade union powerbrokers closely aligned with the US embassy in Canberra. Rudd had angered the Obama administration by calling for an accommodation between the US and China, which cut across US plans to aggressively undermine China's strategic position in Asia.

Under Gillard, Australia was closely integrated into the US military build-up, including the possible stationing of US warships at the Stirling base in Western Australia, and drones and aircraft on the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Since his reinstatement as prime minister in June this year, Rudd has maintained a complete silence on tensions between Washington and China, and Australian involvement in US military plans.

Speaking at the CSIS last month, Admiral Greenert was confident of Rudd's full support. "You know, we've just had a change in government in Australia. The previous government, though, was very bullish on their relationship with the United States of America. There's every indication that the new [Rudd] government is exactly the same way," he declared.

Behind the backs of the working class, the Labor government has put the Australian population on the frontline of a US war with China. Greenert's strategic document reiterated that by 2020, the US naval will have shifted 60 percent of its forces to the Indo-Pacific region. Despite budget reductions, the navy will maintain an aircraft carrier strike group in the Middle East and Asia Pacific, with the capacity to "surge" another strike group to the region. The naval forces will not only be increased in size, but bolstered with new military hardware, including the deployment of Virginia class nuclear submarines.

The US Air Force will also deploy 60 percent of its overseas-based assets to the region. Late last month, General Herbert Carlisle announced plans to station war planes and personnel throughout the Indo Pacific, including in northern Australia, Changi East air base in Singapore, Korat air base in northern Thailand, India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. (See: "US general reveals plans for Air Force expansion in Asia")

The Indian government has reacted by denying that US aircraft will be based at Thiruvanthapuram in the southern Indian state of Kerala, but has not denied that American planes would use Indian military bases. Access to air force bases throughout the region is part

of US Air Force plans to be able to "redirect" its war planes to alternative sites in the event that a conflict with China renders its main air bases inoperable.

The Pentagon is also seeking to refurbish old World War II airfields in the Pacific for the same purpose. US Marines are rebuilding an airfield on Tinian in the North Marianas, while the Air Force has applied to establish an airfield on nearby Saipan. Jan Van Tol, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, who has been closely involved in discussions of Air-Sea Battle, has suggested that other wartime bases on Palau and Wake Island are also under consideration.



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