Sydney's week-long military extravaganza foreshadows new wars

James Cogan
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In November 2011, the former Labor Party Prime Minister Julia Gillard stood beside US President Barack Obama to align Australia with Washington's military and diplomatic "pivot" to Asia. American and Australian strategic documents have been explicit about the purpose of this "pivot"—to position air and naval forces that will be used to wage war against China, and prevent the Asian power from attempting to supplant US imperialism in the Asia-Pacific region.

Behind the backs of the Australian population, the Australian military is being integrated into the US military's AirSea Battle doctrine. Under this plan, US forces will launch attacks on the Chinese mainland, while Australian forces will cut off China's maritime trade links with the Middle East and Africa, starving its economy of oil, gas and other essential resources. To this end, the former Rudd and Gillard governments committed to acquiring new warships and aircraft over the coming years. The newly formed Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott is seamlessly continuing these plans, pledging to significantly increase military spending to enable their realisation.

As the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I approaches, a new war, with catastrophic global consequences, is being prepared. For the ruling elites and governments responsible, smothering the population—especially the youth—in an ideological fog of nationalism, patriotism and militarism is critical in order to mobilise the necessary cannon fodder, and to suppress the broad popular opposition to war.

This fact lies behind the unprecedented spectacle organised in Sydney over the past week. The city was transformed into an arena for the shameless glorification of militarism and war, ostensibly to commemorate the centenary of the entry into Sydney Harbour of the first fleet of warships purchased by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) on October 4, 1913.

The character of the multi-million dollar extravaganza, dubbed "International Fleet Review", had been determined by the Gillard Labor government and military commanders in late 2011. It featured the entry into the harbour of 19 Australian naval vessels, 18 warships invited from 17 other countries and a flotilla of tall-mast sailing ships. Tens of thousands of people crowded the foreshore last Saturday to watch as the ships, with jet fighters and helicopters flying overhead, were reviewed by the governor general, the Australian representative of the British monarchy, and by Prince Harry, fourth-in-line to the throne.

On Saturday evening, over one million reportedly assembled to watch what was billed as the largest fireworks and light display in the city since the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. The iconic "sails" of the Sydney Opera House and the pylons of the Harbour Bridge were used to screen a sanitised "history" of the Navy, complete with broadcasts of wartime propaganda footage, laser lights, frenetic techno-rhythms and martial themes. After the playing of the "Last Post" and a minute's silence, more than 7.7 tonnes of fireworks were blasted into the night sky from warships, barges, the bridge and city skyscrapers. To conclude the festivities, "We Salute You" and the emblem of the RAN were beamed onto the Opera House.

Every second of the mind-numbing event was aimed at covering over the ghastly realities of war, and whitewashing the war crimes of Australian imperialism.

The state-owned media outlets, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), joined with Fox-owned Sky News to televise enthusiastic, breathless commentary. As well as the inevitable homage to the bloodbaths of the two imperialist world wars, International Fleet Review saluted the RAN's involvement in such brutal neo-colonial enterprises as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the 1991 Gulf War on Iraq, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Even Operation Resolute—the ongoing use of the Navy to intercept boats carrying desperate refugees and prevent them from claiming asylum in Australia—was proudly projected as worthy of acclaim.

The media-backed festivities continued throughout the

week. Last Sunday and Monday, many thousands paid to make guided tours of the warships and tall ships, as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity", while military bands performed throughout the city. On Wednesday, around 4,000 sailors from several countries marched through Sydney's central business district, flanked by cheering and flag-waving onlookers, with yet another fly-over of the city by military helicopters. The week-long event formally ends today, as the convoy of warships leaves Sydney Harbour.

The glorification of the armed forces has become an ever more prominent feature of Australian social life. Between 2008 and 2012, the Rudd and Gillard Labor government created three additional days honouring the military and requiring annual services—Bombing of Darwin Day, Battle for Australia Day (1942–43 Pacific War) and Merchant Navy Day—on top of Anzac Day and Remembrance Day. The Anzac Day marches on April 25 have become ever-more jingoistic, with school children in particular drawn into annual patriotic services. In 2012, Labor allocated a budget of more than $80 million to the centenary of Anzac Day—the hundredth anniversary of the Gallipoli landing in 1915.

Absent from all these events is any critical examination of the actual history and role of Australian imperialism and its military forces over the past century.

Ten months after the fledging Australian imperialist state reviewed its new fleet in Sydney Harbour in 1913, the First World War began. The leader of the Labor Party, Andrew Fisher, infamously declared that Australia would fight for the British Empire to "the last man and the last shilling." Within days, Australia's new warships had been dispatched to attack the German colonies in the Pacific, and hunt down German ships in the Indian Ocean.

The Royal Australian Navy subsequently escorted the transport ships that carried the tens of thousands of young Australians, deluded by imperialist propaganda, who were sent to the trenches of Gallipoli and the Western Front. Out of a population of just 4.5 million—of whom 416,000, or 8 percent, joined the military—Australian casualties in World War I were some 60,000 dead and at least 156,000 wounded. For sending a generation of youth to the slaughter, the Australian ruling elite was rewarded by its British patrons with colonial control over New Guinea, New Britain and Bougainville, former German possessions.

Barely 20 years after the "war to end all wars", the Second World War erupted. Once again, Australian troops, ships and planes were sent off to Europe and North Africa to support British imperialism. After the entry of Japan into the war, the Labor government of Prime Minister John Curtin transferred Australia's allegiance to the rising power of the United States, as the British Empire began to crumble in Asia. This time, the Australian military served as junior partner to US forces, as they fought to establish American dominance over the region. For much of the Pacific War, Australia served as a critical staging base for the American military.

The new strategic relationship established by Labor with Washington was cemented in 1951 with the signing of the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) military alliance. As they had previously done for Britain, after World War II Australian governments sent forces to various conflicts as payment for US patronage. Canberra also hosted American bases and supported US policies in every part of the globe. In return, Washington has assisted the Australian ruling class assert its own imperialist interests in the South Pacific and South East Asia, and more generally on the international arena.

The ongoing role of Australian imperialism as the junior partner of the US was the subject of the less public, but more serious event that coincided with the International Fleet Review. The "RAN Sea Power Conference 2013" began on Monday and featured three days of discussions on geo-political relations and naval issues in "Indo-Pacific Asia" by current and former defence ministers, retired and serving naval commanders and a plethora of strategic analysts. The subtext of the various lectures was the growing US-China rivalry and military tensions.

Less than one year after the patriotic celebrations that attended the launching of the Royal Australian Navy in October 1913, the assassination of an Austrian archduke by a Serbian nationalist in far-away Europe provided the spark that ignited World War I—the most disastrous war, to that point, in the history of mankind. Exactly one hundred years later, flashpoints from the Korean peninsula to the South China Sea, created by the provocative encirclement of China by the US and its allies throughout the region, including Australia, are creating the potential for an even greater global catastrophe.

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