

Australian government steps up commitment to US “pivot”

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At its first annual AUSMIN (Australia-US Ministerial) meeting of foreign and defence ministers, held in Washington last week, the new Abbott Liberal-National government aligned itself completely behind the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia to militarily contain China.

Amid rising tensions between China and the US and its allies, notably Japan, the AUSMIN communiqué declared: “The United States and Australia are committed to modernising our Alliance by working together to support the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region.”

Although barely reported in the media, and little spoken of by the Abbott government itself, the lengthy communiqué marked a stepping up of Canberra’s commitment, behind the backs of the Australian people, to Washington’s military build-up against China.

The document pledged Australia to not only increase its hosting of US ground, naval and air forces, but also further integrate Australian military forces into those of the US, host new space surveillance facilities and collaborate on a long list of US military initiatives.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister David Johnston joined their counterparts, Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, to sign a Statement of Principles providing “a common vision for advancing the US force posture initiatives in northern Australia,” and agreed to start negotiating a “binding agreement” to support US rotational deployments.

The Abbott government is taking up seamlessly where its Labor predecessor left off. Prime Minister Julia Gillard first promised greater access for US forces to Australian military bases. She hosted President Barack Obama in November 2011 when he announced the “pivot” on the floor of the Australian parliament.

At last year’s AUSMIN gathering no further public commitment on bases was made, beyond confirming the boosting of the annual deployment of US Marines in Darwin to 2,500—a full Marine Air Ground Task Force—by 2017.

This year’s communiqué went further. It spoke publicly of “increased rotations of US Air Force aircraft in northern Australia,” further “naval cooperation in Australia” and activities such as “joint and combined training” and “combined exercises in Australia and multilateral engagement in the broader region.”

The communiqué committed Canberra to continue the already extensive integration of the Australian military with American forces. It pledged to enhance “the interoperability of Australian and US forces, especially as this relates to a common commitment to cooperation on combat and transport aircraft, helicopters, and submarine systems and weapons, with special focus on future submarine efforts.”

The emphasis on submarines followed a key Washington think tank report, by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), which nominated the Stirling naval base near Perth as critical for US nuclear submarine operations. It also advised Australia to purchase American nuclear submarines. (See: “US think tank report: Australia central to American war plans against China”).

The CSBA report, which identified Australia as the US military’s “Gateway to the Indo-Pacific,” is one of a series of recent American reports outlining detailed scenarios for a war against China, with Australia playing a crucial role as a launching pad for US naval and air strikes.

The AUSMIN statement also pointed to a heightened role for Australia in the Pentagon’s ballistic missile

shield program, designed to neutralise China's capacity to respond to a nuclear attack. The two governments will "work together to identify potential Australian contributions to ballistic missile defense in the Asia-Pacific region."

The document outlined agreements to construct two "space security" facilities in Western Australia—a "unique, highly advanced US space surveillance telescope" and a US C-Band space surveillance radar—in order to "contribute to the safety and security of space-based systems on which we rely." These space systems are critical to Washington's global spying operations and preparations for space warfare.

Despite the diplomatic crisis between Australia and Indonesia over the US-Australian monitoring of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's phone in 2009, the communiqué pledged closer cyber collaboration. Under the pretext of addressing "cyberspace threats", Australia is integrated into the massive US global spying operations and preparation to wage cyber war.

At the same time, the two governments "agreed to seek opportunities to increase defence cooperation with Indonesia." Because it is strategically located aside shipping lanes on which China depends, between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia is a vital location for the "pivot." Likewise, the communiqué vowed closer military and strategic ties with other key states involved in the encirclement of China—Japan, South Korea and India—as well as Burma/Myanmar and Fiji.

Canberra's commitment to Washington did not stop there. The communiqué spelt out "a common approach on issues of global concern," most notably with regard to Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Israel that are central to US strategy in the Middle East. It contained a thinly veiled message that Canberra would join any war initiated by Washington. It recalled that "Australians and Americans have fought side-by-side in every major conflict since World War I on battlefields from Europe to the Pacific."

The communiqué demanded that China display "respect for international law, unimpeded lawful commerce, and freedom of navigation in the East China Sea and the South China Sea." These are code words for lining up behind Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines in their increasingly tense territorial disputes with Beijing.

The Abbott government's full support for the "pivot" was underlined this week when it immediately joined the Obama administration's strident opposition to Beijing's new East China Sea air defence identification zone. As Washington provocatively flew B-52 bombers through China's zone, Foreign Minister Bishop summoned China's ambassador to accuse China of threatening regional stability.

Beijing responded sharply, calling Bishop's remarks "irresponsible" and "mistaken" and declaring: "China cannot accept them." Foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang called on Australia to "immediately correct its mistake, so as to avoid damaging China-Australia relations."

However, Bishop and Prime Minister Tony Abbott reiterated their stand, insisting that they would oppose China's position regardless of any economic repercussions. Abbott accused Beijing of violating international law and declared that as "a strong ally of the United States" and "a strong ally of Japan", "we will speak our mind."

The vitriolic exchanges with Beijing underscore how quickly Australia could be drawn into a war with China, alongside the US and Japan, Washington's other key ally in confronting China. Such a war would have catastrophic implications for the working class in China, Japan, the US, Australia and all over Asia, threatening the lives of millions of people.



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