

Australian government eyes purchase of Triton drone aircraft

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Australia's defence minister David Johnston informed the media this month that he intends to recommend the purchase of seven MQ-4C Triton drones for the Australian military, at the cost of up to \$3 billion.

The Triton has a wingspan of 39.8 metres, comparable to a Boeing 757. It is designed to stay airborne for up to 30 hours, flying at altitudes as high as 18,000 metres and at a speed of up to 575 kilometres per hour. With a range of 16,000 kilometres in a single flight, its intended purpose is long-range surveillance of vast areas, such as the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The US Navy claims that a Triton can monitor an area of close to seven million square kilometres in one operation.

The aircraft was put through a series of reportedly successful test flights in January by the US Navy, which has ordered 68 Tritons from manufacturer Northrop Grumman. Tritons are expected to go into operational use by the US Navy in 2017 and Australian acquisitions would be active by 2018 or 2019. Johnston told the *Australian* on February 15: "As a maritime nation, a capability with this type of coverage must have our attention."

The purchase of Tritons was opposed in military circles in 2012, when longstanding plans to acquire drones were revived by the then Labor government. Critics at the time raised concerns over the fact that the aircraft is not designed to carry weapons, unlike the much cheaper Mariner drone, which is a modified version of the Predator used extensively for assassinations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A Mariner does not have the same range or flight time of the Triton, but can carry a payload of missiles, enabling it to be used to attack ships.

The reason for the concern over armaments was

pointed to by Andrew Davies of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Foreign Correspondent" program in September 2012, he stressed the context of rising geopolitical tensions in Asia and the Australian-backed US "pivot" to the region. "It's about the Indian Ocean and securing our sea lanes," he said. "In the Indian Ocean we see growing competition between the navies of China, India and the US. US attention is now pivoting toward this part of the world."

Over the following months, the preparations by the United States and its main Asia-Pacific allies—Japan and Australia—for a military confrontation with China have become increasingly public.

The military strategies for war with China all involve a naval blockade that prevents Chinese shipping using the main sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, in particular the key Malacca, Lombok and Sunda Straits. Australian territory would be one of the main bases for naval and air operations. The objective would be to starve China of energy and raw materials and collapse its export-dependent economy. The US military's AirSea Battle concept also includes unleashing air strikes and missile attacks on command and control and air defence systems on mainland China itself, and attacking the Chinese Navy if it attempted to break the blockade.

The US and Australian navies would require constantly updated information on the movement of commercial shipping from the Middle East and Africa across the Indian Ocean, as well as Chinese naval movements, in order to be able to intercept them.

Currently, Australia uses manned P-3C Orion planes and the Jindalee radar network (JORN) to monitor the waters to the north and west of the Australian

continent, out to a distance of approximately 3,000 kilometres. Tritons, flying from airbases such as Learmonth in Western Australia or Darwin in the Northern Territory, would vastly expand the area under surveillance. The construction of a drone base on the Australian-controlled Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean would enable an ever greater area to be constantly monitored.

Leaks in 2013 from within the US defense establishment revealed that the American military is particularly keen to operate its own drones—most likely Mariners—from the Australian Cocos Islands. But a major upgrade to its airfield is required first.

Rory Medcalf, a strategic analyst at the Australian-based Lowy Institute, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 15 that a recent Chinese deployment of three ships, which sailed through the Sunda and Lombok Straits and conducted exercises in the Indian Ocean, “bolsters the case for Australia to invest in long-range surveillance drones.” (See: “Chinese navy conducts exercises in east Indian Ocean”)

On February 21, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced the Australian Air Force will also be acquiring 8 to 12 Boeing P-8A Poseidon aircraft by 2017—at the cost of at least \$4 billion—to replace the Orions. The P-8A’s are crewed surveillance planes, but are also designed to attack shipping and submarines. Each aircraft, the size of a Boeing 737-800, can carry a payload of 10,000 kilograms of torpedos and anti-ship missiles.

A Royal Australian Air Force press release stated that the P-8A has “an unrefuelled range of over 4,000 nautical miles (7,500 kilometres) or the ability to remain on station conducting low-level Anti Submarine Warfare (ASW) missions for over four hours at a range of more than 1,200 nautical miles (2,200 km) from base. The P-8A is also air-to-air refuelable from the boom of tanker aircraft such as the KC-30A, pushing its endurance out to over 20 hours—making it possible to patrol Australia’s isolated Southern Ocean [Antarctic] territories.”

To deflect attention from the military purposes of both the Triton and Poseidon acquisitions, media commentary has instead emphasised their potential role in detecting and assisting with the interception of boats carrying asylum seekers. The reactionary “border protection” policy against refugees by successive

Liberal and Labor governments has always served as a convenient cover for constant naval operations and surveillance, particularly near the strategic Sunda and Lombok Straits, and Australian involvement in the US preparations for war against China.



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