

Australian Senate committee discusses threat of US-China war

Mike Head
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A chilling exchange occurred during an Australian Senate estimates committee hearing last week about the likelihood of Australia being on the front line of a war between the US and China or between Japan and China.

The little-reported discussion took place on June 2, two days after US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel delivered a menacing and provocative speech in Singapore accusing China of “destabilising, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea.”

Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue, the annual Asian defence forum, Hagel issued what amounted to a threat of war, declaring that the US “will not look the other way when fundamental principles of the international order are being challenged.”

Hagel cast off Washington’s pretence of neutrality in the maritime territorial disputes involving China in the South and East China Seas. He charged Beijing with “intimidation and coercion” in the South China Sea, directed against the Philippines and Vietnam.

In reality, as part of its military and strategic “pivot” to Asia, the Obama administration has encouraged Southeast Asian countries, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, to aggressively press their claims against China. As a result, low-level regional disputes have been transformed into dangerous international flashpoints.

Interviewed by Fairfax Media from the Shangri-La Dialogue, Australian Defence Minister David Johnston stated that he shared Hagel’s view. “The US, Australia and Japan are very concerned that unilateral action is destabilising the region of the South China Sea particularly, and East China Sea,” he said.

Johnston went further, asserting that China’s “destabilisation” was “quite damaging to the future economic prospects” of Australia and other countries in the Asia-Pacific.

In the Senate committee, having just returned from Singapore, Johnston was asked how serious and significant was the threat of conflict, in the light of his Fairfax Media comments and Hagel’s “strong words.” He replied: “Instability in an area where we have a large proportion of our export earnings flowing through to market is very serious. It is very serious indeed.”

Asked by Labor Senator Sam Dastyari if he agreed with that assessment, Defence Department head Dennis Richardson responded: “Yes, absolutely.”

When asked if there was a threat of actual conflict breaking out, Richardson said: “No one wants conflict... However, there is always the risk of an accident or a miscalculation. It is the concern about miscalculation that could lead unexpectedly to something.”

Johnston and Richardson then repeatedly refused to answer further questions about how such a “miscalculation” would change Australia’s role, potentially involving it in a devastating war. “We do not go there,” Richardson insisted.

In particular, Richardson and Johnston would not say whether the ANZUS Treaty between the US, Australia and New Zealand or Australia’s Joint Declaration of Security Cooperation with Japan would necessarily involve Australia in a war against China.

Richardson told Dastyari: “I would suggest that you read the ANZUS Treaty.” Johnston emphasised, “This discussion is not in our national interest to telegraph what might happen in a speculative environment.”

Committee Chairman Senator Alan Eggleston promptly shut down the discussion, telling Dastyari: “I think you should listen to what is being said because you are treading into rather sensitive areas.” Dastyari quickly complied, explaining that he had only sought information about “various serious matters.”

Dastyari, recently installed in the Senate after rising

through the ranks of the Labor Party machine, was a loyal henchman of Julia Gillard's Labor government, which unequivocally signed up to Obama's aggressive "pivot" in mid-2010 following the backroom ousting of Kevin Rudd as prime minister.

The Labor senator's line of questioning pointed to concerns about the lack of preparation of public opinion for a military conflict that could very well trigger the use of nuclear weapons. Dastyari had begun by asking Johnston about the apparent contradiction between his statement backing Hagel and the Australian government's claim, also repeated in Johnston's Fairfax Media interview, to not take sides in the territorial disputes between China and its neighbours.

This elicited a forthright assertion by Richardson, who intervened at that point, that while "not taking sides," Australia had a "national interest" in the disputes because "fifty-two percent of our merchandise export shipping trade passes through the South China Sea."

Richardson later abandoned the posture of neutrality, accusing China of taking an "oil drilling platform into disputed areas [with Vietnam] with a flotilla of ships," and recalling that the US has publicly stated that its "alliance obligations" to Japan would be activated in the event of a conflict with China in the East China Sea.

In the corridors of power, behind the backs of the public, this is the kind of discussion that is taking place about the potential for Australia to become involved in a war for domination over the Asia-Pacific and its strategic waterways. As the committee chairman's intervention indicated, this is a "rather sensitive" discussion that must be kept, as far as possible, out of the public view, for fear of popular opposition.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday, political editor Laura Tingle partially reported the Senate committee exchange. She noted: "Many Australians would find the comparisons, behind closed doors, between the current regional tensions and the spiraling treaty arrangements that led to World War I rather disconcerting."

On the eve of Prime Minister Tony Abbott's visit to Washington this week for talks with the Obama administration, which are expected to focus on military and intelligence issues, Tingle indicated that an even greater Australian commitment to US war plans was

likely to be demanded.

Tingle observed that the Abbott government's May budget had already pledged a 6 percent increase in real terms in defence spending "as a bone to throw to Washington that has been increasing pressure on its allies to do more heavy lifting on defence spending." She added: "The big question is whether the US will seek even more from Australia by way of even greater enmeshment of our defence forces, or possibly even forward deployments in the region."

These preparations are being hidden from the working class and young people. Apart from Tingle's article—written for a business audience—not a word about the Senate discussion or the real agenda of Abbott's trip has appeared in the media.



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