

Australian budget boosts spending on war and surveillance

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One of the most revealing, and least reported, features of last week's Australian federal budget was increased funding for the military and intelligence agencies, not just for this year but for every following year.

While continuing to cut funding for health, education and welfare, the 2015 budget outlined significant rises in spending for overseas military operations, weaponry and war-related surveillance activities. Preparations are being made for a new period of war, in close alliance with the US, and for stepped-up repression to deal with the rising opposition to austerity and militarism.

Already, Australia is directly involved in the Obama administration's intensifying confrontation with China, and is on the frontline of the latest neo-colonial US-led war in the Middle East.

The annual defence budget jumped by more than \$2.5 billion to \$31.8 billion—a 7 percent rise on top of an 8 percent increase last year. Much of the extra cash will pay for Australia's participation in Washington's war in Iraq and Syria.

The intelligence apparatus received another \$1.2 billion boost over the next three years, in addition to the \$1 billion rise in the 2014 budget. The lion's share is going to the overseas spy agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), including to fund its activities in the Middle East.

Overall, the budget for overseas military operations tops nearly \$2 billion over the next three years, taking the total spent on foreign wars to more than \$16.6 billion since the 1999 intervention in East Timor.

The bulk of the additional money will be for Operation Okra in Iraq (\$360 million this year alone) and Operation Accordion in the Middle East (\$189 million this year), with another \$100 million to be spent on the fortified Australian embassy in Baghdad.

Operation Okra currently consists of 400 personnel

assigned to the air force bombing operation in Iraq and 200 commandos in the Special Operations force that is working on the ground with the Iraqi army and Shiite militias to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

When Prime Minister Tony Abbott, backed by the Labor opposition, announced the deployment last September, he claimed that it would cost about \$500 million a year. That estimate has already been exceeded. And this year's decision to deploy an extra 300 soldiers to an Australian-New Zealand "training" mission to try to bolster the Iraqi armed forces, could add up to \$200 million more to the annual bill.

A big part of the current allocation is just to operate the war planes. Not counting the cost of the bombs and munitions, a FA/18 Super Hornet strike aircraft costs \$25,625 an hour to fly. The Airbus KC30A refueller consumes \$16,000 an hour, the C-17 Globemaster transport plane \$24,000 a flying hour, the C-130 Hercules transport aircraft \$15,000 a flying hour, and the E7 Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft \$45,277 an hour.

During 2015-16, the military will get about \$7 billion for new hardware focused on fighting on distant battlefields. This includes C-17 strategic heavy lift aircraft (\$261 million), E-A/18 Growler Super Hornet electronic warfare fighters (\$890 million), Air Warfare Destroyers (\$746 million) and vehicles (\$205 million).

This capital expenditure will grow rapidly to \$11 billion in 2018-19. Among the acquisitions will be "advanced fifth-generation Joint Strike Fighters; new patrol, surveillance and transport aircraft; new body armour and advanced technology to counter improvised explosive devices; and replacements for the ANZAC Class frigates and the Collins Class submarines."

Defence Minister Kevin Andrews also referred to

“state-of-the-art Special Forces vehicles being assembled in Australia.” These purchases add to decisions announced last year to buy P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft and MQ-4C Triton unmanned aircraft.

Far bigger spending will be unveiled in the government’s Defence White Paper, due to be released in August. Among the purchases will be submarines, estimated to cost \$20 billion to \$50 billion, and a fleet of surface warships, costing billions more, to replace the navy’s frigates.

There is bipartisan unity on the military build-up, which is an essential component of the unequivocal commitment given by the previous Labor government to the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia to prepare for war against China.

Both Abbott’s Liberal-National government and the Labor opposition have pledged to boost military spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product, in line with Washington’s calls for a greater contribution. By 2023, this will amount to more than \$50 billion a year—enough to build about 25 major hospitals or 4,000 primary schools.

Grouped together, the allocations for defence, “national security” and law enforcement are the third largest item in the budget—\$35 billion a year. This is more than total federal education spending. Health and welfare remain the biggest outlays, but they are increasingly being wound back.

ASIS will receive a massive funding boost of nearly \$300 million over the next six years—an average of about 14 percent a year. It is actively engaged in Iraq and Syria, following the passage of legislation authorising it to hand targeting intelligence direct to the military. As a first instalment, the agency’s 2015–16 budget will increase by \$30 million to \$405 million.

The internal spy force, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), will receive an additional \$12 million after a large injection last year. Its personnel will rise by another 75 to 1,768. This is more than treble the number before 2001, when the fraudulent “war on terrorism” was launched, providing the pretext for a deepening assault on basic legal and democratic rights.

As part of this process, the budget allocated \$131 million for telecommunications and Internet companies to help them store the metadata of their customers for

two years. This will give the intelligence services the capacity to assemble detailed profiles of the day-to-day activities, personal contacts and political views of the entire population.

Since September, when Abbott announced the Middle East operation, the government, the police and the security agencies—also with Labor’s total support—have mounted one terrorism scare campaign after another, accompanied by 23 arrests in eight sets of raids on homes.

At the same time, more money is also being provided for the “celebration” of the centenary of World War I—an ideological campaign designed to condition public opinion, especially young people, for new wars.

In the budget, an additional \$107 million was set aside for a new “interpretive” Australian war museum at Villers-Bretonneux in northern France, \$36 million for extra commemorations of World War I and later conflicts, such as the disastrous Vietnam War, and \$13 million for “official histories” of the East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

The *Honest History* web site estimates that total spending on World War I celebrations now amounts to \$551.8 million—\$331 million in federal funding, \$140 million in state and territory outlays and \$80 million in corporate sponsorship. If the \$250 million target for corporate funding is achieved, the total will reach \$700 million, about 3.5 times the amount to be spent on the war centenary by every other country in the world combined.



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