

# Australia deeply embedded in US military build-up in Asia

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Just over a week ago, the remarks of US Assistant Defence Secretary David Shear to a Senate committee in Washington triggered strenuous denials in Canberra that the government had any intention of allowing the Pentagon to base nuclear-capable B1 strategic bombers in Australia.

Shear indicated that the US would move the bombers, as well as surveillance aircraft, to Australia as part of its military build-up against China throughout the Asia Pacific region. He was specifically speaking at a Senate hearing entitled “Safeguarding American Interests in the East and South China Seas” focussed on how to challenge Chinese territorial claims.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott reacted immediately, declaring that Shear had “mis-spoken” and that the “US does not have any plans to base those aircraft in Australia.” He also insisted that the Australian alliance with the US was “not aimed at anyone” but was simply “a force for stability” in the region.

The purpose of Abbott’s comments was two-fold. In the first instance, the Australian government was concerned not to trigger a reaction from China, which remains the country’s largest trading partner. Above all, however, the entire political and media establishment is determined to block public debate and to keep the population in the dark over the integration of Australia into US war preparations against China.

As it turned out, Shear did not “mis-speak.” Last Friday’s *Australian* reported: “It seems we will probably be hosting some American B1 supersonic bombers after all. Canberra and Washington are in negotiations about who pays what for extensions to the runway at the Tindal air base in the Northern Territory. One of the main purposes of extending the runway at the base, near Katherine, is so that the B1 bomber can

use it.”

The article by foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who is well connected in Canberra and Washington, prompted no reaction from the Abbott government or the wider media. Sheridan, a strident supporter of closer US-Australian military ties, was at pains to play down the plans, maintaining the fiction that the “rotation” of US warplanes through Australian air force bases did not constitute a basing arrangement.

Sheridan lashed out at “Mr Shear’s foolish, ill-advised and uncoordinated testimony” because the US official had let the cat out of the bag. “Both the Australian and US governments have refused to explicitly link US force rotations through northern Australia with any plan to counter China militarily, much less to specific moves responding to the increased Chinese presence in the South China Sea,” he wrote.

Nevertheless that is exactly what the US is preparing. For months, the Obama administration, in league with the media, have been whipping up a scare campaign over Chinese land reclamation on rocks and reefs under its control in the South China Sea. Now the Pentagon is drawing up plans for so-called “freedom of navigation” operations—provocatively sending warships or warplanes within the 12-mile territorial limit to directly challenge Chinese sovereignty over these islets.

Regardless of the public denials, the Australian government and military is intimately involved. The previous Labor government made Australia a central component of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” including the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region against China. Under Abbott, US forces have gained growing access to Australian bases. Nuclear capable B-52 bombers are already “rotating” through Australia as are some 1,100 US Marines.

Washington clearly wants more than support for a US provocation against China in the South China Sea. In a comment in the *Age* last week, Bonnie Glaser, a senior Asia analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, argued that Australia should join the US to implement “a cost-imposition strategy” aimed at changing China’s behaviour.

After painting China as the aggressor, Glaser calls for the US and Australia to “respond to Chinese coercive actions by using naval forces” She insists that, since “risk-averse strategies” such as diplomatic pressure have not worked, “an effective counter-conversion strategy must involve assuming greater risk.”

The obvious question is: greater risk of what? The language employed in strategic circles is to obscure the fact that what is being prepared is a military challenge to China that could easily lead, whether deliberately or accidentally, to a clash escalating into open conflict between two nuclear armed powers. That is why the Pentagon wants to “rotate” nuclear-capable aircraft through northern Australia.

Despite the official denials, the Australian and American governments and militaries are clearly engaged in closed-door discussions about the South China Sea. Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) head Peter Jennings told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 16 that Australia should send military aircraft and ships to stop China from asserting territorial control across important trading routes. Jennings chairs the Abbott government’s advisory panel for drafting the next key Defence white paper.

Encouraged by Washington, the Australian government is also strengthening military ties with Japan—the other cornerstone of the US “pivot.” Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last weekend and foreshadowed an agreement to allow easier entry for Japanese military personnel into Australia for training exercises, and vice versa.

Already a contingent of 40 Japanese troops will take part for the first time in the major biennial Talisman Sabre exercise starting in July involving as many as 30,000 military personnel from the US, Australia and New Zealand. Australian Defence Minister Kevin Andrews is as yet “still undecided” on whether to invite Chinese observers.

Australia’s growing integration into US war preparations is generating deep concern in Beijing. Wang Zhengyu from the China Institute of International Studies told the *Australian Financial Review* last Friday that Beijing drew no distinction between American B1 bombers “rotating” through the Northern Territory or “basing” there.

“Whatever it is, it would be a very bad signal for regional security,” Wang said. “It could be the straw which breaks the camel’s back in the Australia-China relationship. It would be a step too far.” His comments echoed the warning contained in an editorial in the state-owned *Global Times* newspaper that hosting B1 bombers would cross a “red line” for which Australia could “pay a dear price.”

The price is likely to be paid in economic relations. Significantly last week, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang signed a series of deals in Brazil providing a massive \$US4 billion in credit facilities to the country’s giant iron ore producer, Vale. The credit is a much-needed life line for Vale amid sharply falling iron ore prices and fierce global competition, especially with the major Australian producers.



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