

Officials signal Australia will join US provocation in South China Sea

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Remarks yesterday by Australian Department of Defence secretary Dennis Richardson are the clearest indication yet that Australia will actively participate in a US military show of force and violation of Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Addressing a meeting in Sydney, Richardson echoed the language of the Obama administration, declaring that Australia had a “national interest” in “freedom of navigation” through the Chinese-claimed areas. He asserted that the Australian government was “concerned about the unprecedented pace and scale of China’s land-reclamation in the South China Sea.” The Chinese government is building infrastructure, such as small ports and airstrips, on several islets and reefs.

Following Richardson’s comments, the *Australian Financial Review* editorialised today in support of Australia joining the US to assert “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea, saying this would demonstrate that “China’s claims on sea and sky across this vital trade route are recognised by no-one else.”

In subsequent media coverage, unnamed sources within the Defence Department leaked details to Fairfax Media of discussions taking place within the Australian government and military.

According to a report today on the online *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Australian officials” have alleged that China “has moved weaponry onto artificial islands that it is building in contested areas of the South China Sea.” This accusation, for which no evidence or sources were provided, has been picked up and broadcast by other sections of the Australian media.

“Senior military circles” told Fairfax Media they had discussed Australian air force and naval personnel taking part in “freedom of navigation missions.”

Prime Minister Tony Abbott will reportedly receive a briefing within two weeks of “options, including fly-

throughs, sail-throughs and exercises involving various regional partners.” Such options would be developed in the closest discussion with the Pentagon.

Citing “senior officers and officials,” the article asserted that “Australia could join a humanitarian or military exercise with the United States or one of several regional partners including Japan, Malaysia and Singapore.” Such a move, it stated, “has been discussed in Washington and key capitals in the region, but no proposal has yet been put to Canberra, it is understood.”

The report stated that Australian military officers have discussed the “need to demonstrate that they do not recognise any 12-mile territorial zone or a more expansive economic zone that China may unilaterally declare around its freshly-minted islands.”

An Australian frigate, HMAS Perth, and a Collins-class conventional submarine, HMAS Rankin, are currently deployed in South East Asia and thus available to participate in any such provocative operations.

Australian military personnel may already be deployed in the South China Sea as part of exchanges with the US military. The radio transmissions broadcast in CNN’s coverage of a US navy reconnaissance flight last week near Chinese-claimed islets featured a radio operator speaking with a distinctive Australian accent. The Pentagon invited a CNN news crew on board the flight as part of US efforts to intensify its pressure on China.

Such is the integration of the Australian armed forces with the US Pacific Command since the US “pivot to Asia” was announced in 2011 that dozens of Australian military personnel are embedded at any given time with American air force, navy, marine and army units throughout the region.

Even more critical for US military operations across the Indo-Pacific are the satellite and communications bases on Australian territory. The key “control and command” base at Pine Gap in central Australia provides targeting information for everything from US aircraft and drones, Aegis destroyers and other missile defence systems through to submarine-launched nuclear missiles.

The North West Cape base in Western Australia is one of the most important US “anti-satellite” facilities, tracking Chinese and Russian satellites for destruction by unspecified weapons. Bases at Geraldton in Western Australia and near Darwin in the Northern Territory make possible the internal secure military Smartphone network and an array of other communications.

Since the “pivot” was announced, agreements signed between Canberra and Washington have allowed for the stationing of US Marines in the northern Australian city of Darwin and greater access for US military aircraft and warships to Australian military bases and ports.

The degree to which Australia is bound militarily and politically to US imperialism means that there would not even be a vote in the Australian parliament to decide if the country went to war with China. It would be immediately involved—and be a target—from the beginning of hostilities.

Neither the Abbott government nor the opposition Labor Party and the Greens have issued any official statement on Australia’s role in the looming conflict. Despite the accelerating pace of events in the South China Sea, the media coverage is limited, in large measure to block a public debate about the dangers of conflict.

Behind the backs of the working class, actions are being planned and decisions taken that risk triggering an open war between the US and its allies, and China—a war which would inexorably escalate toward the catastrophic use of nuclear weapons.



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