

Australian strategists debate support for Washington's provocations against China

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The Australian Coalition government, with the support of the Labor Party opposition, has signalled its backing for the Obama administration and its provocative repudiation of China's long-standing territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Leaks to the *Australian* newspaper last month indicated that Australian aircraft or ships could be used to breach the 12-mile exclusion zone surrounding reefs and islets where China is reclaiming land to build docks and airstrips. Such an action would force Beijing to make a humiliating back down to the US and its allies, or militarily confront the incursion.

US imperialism's reckless determination to compel China to accept its domination over Asia could trigger a catastrophic conflict, involving Australia from the outset, that would potentially escalate into the use of nuclear weapons. Every government and military in the region is actively preparing for the prospect of war.

The escalating dangers of war, with a US-directed Australian provocation in the South China Sea possible in the near future, has sparked a series of conflicting opinion pieces in the Australian media, authored by international affairs journalists and strategists.

The predominant position, of unconditional support for the US, up to and including war with China, was advanced by Paul Dibb, the emeritus professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University and author of a defence White Paper in 1986. He wrote in the *Australian* on June 5 under the headline, "Chinese expansion calls for firm challenge." Echoing the positions of both the Obama administration and the Abbott government, he declared Australia was "heavily dependent on freedom of navigation of the seas."

Dibb concluded: "So, while encouraging China to peacefully settle South China Sea disputes, the fact is it looks as though China is headed toward confrontation

with anybody that disagrees with its so-called indisputable territorial claims. In my view, it is time to be firm with China, and that may well involve the deployment of our naval forces and maritime surveillance aircraft."

Such calls for military action are based on lies. It is not China provoking confrontation, but the US and its allies. For years, the US military has openly discussed in strategic papers that it will impose a naval blockade against China and strangle its economy in the event of conflict. The Chinese construction of facilities on the limited territories in the South China Sea is, if anything, a belated reaction.

Washington and Canberra, however, are asserting that their military forces have the "right" to threaten the lifelines of the Chinese economy in sea lanes that are thousands of kilometres from their borders. Moreover, by insisting that China's claims are "disputable," the US and Australia are implicitly endorsing the rival territorial claims of countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam.

The pro-US stance dominates in the Australian political and media establishment. Not a single debate has taken place in parliament over the prospect of the Australian military carrying out provocative actions in the South China Sea. The Greens and the pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance that posture as socialist are part of a general conspiracy of silence, indicating both their pro-imperialist stance and determination to prevent a broad political discussion in the working class on the dangers it faces.

The risk of war, however, has prompted some commentators to urge Australia to distance itself from Washington. In a comment on the *Business Spectator* web site on June 4, former Australian diplomat and

intelligence head Geoff Miller wrote that “it is really most unlikely that freedom of navigation in or over the South China Sea for commercial sea or air traffic is a real concern.” Washington, he stated, was concerned only about its own military movements and did not want its “post-World War II dominance in the Western Pacific challenged.”

Miller concluded: “The US is our ally, while China is our most important trading partner... It would be quite unnecessary and unwise for us to follow the US into yet another ill-considered adventure under the slogan of ‘protecting freedom of commercial navigation,’ which is clearly a straw man.”

Other figures are appealing for Canberra to maintain its alignment with Washington but seek to function as the broker between the US and China, and prevent the escalation of tensions to the point of open warfare.

The most prominent representative of those calling for “balance” is Hugh White of the Lowy Institute and Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University.

In an opinion piece in the *Age* on June 9 entitled “South China Sea not the place to get all bolshie,” White stated that US “tough talk” had placed it in an “awkward situation.” White warned of the acute dangers, writing: “With each step up the escalatory ladder, it becomes more and more damaging for either side to back down, and more and more dangerous if they do not. The stakes get higher and choices get harder, as each side finds itself choosing between humiliation and conflict. That is how wars start.”

White’s conclusion, however, was an appeal for reason. “We must hope they understand this in Washington,” he wrote, and “it would be much better to begin by talking more quietly to Beijing.”

This plea for the US to make strategic compromises to China to avoid conflict has been White’s position since the Obama administration signalled its aggressive stance toward Beijing in 2009. His views were broadly shared by then Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who sought to convince Washington to support his proposals for an “Asia-Pacific Community” and for China to be given greater influence in bodies such as the International Monetary Fund.

American hostility to Rudd’s foreign policy orientation was a major factor in the coup inside the Labor Party on June 23–24, 2010 that installed Julia

Gillard as the new prime minister. In November 2011, with the Gillard government’s backing, Obama formally announced the US “pivot” to Asia, directed against China, in the Australian parliament. The Australian military has since been fully integrated with its US counterparts. Australia’s hosting of US bases and military assets, and active participation in American operations in Asia, mean it would automatically be part of any US-led war with China.

The working class cannot base itself on the futile hopes expressed by the likes of Hugh White that the American ruling elite will back down from military confrontation because its actions threaten to trigger a nuclear conflagration.

American imperialism is being propelled toward war by the systemic breakdown of global capitalism that began in 2008 and the ever-more ruthless struggle internationally for domination over markets and resources. As the global crisis deepens, Washington is determined to subordinate Russia to its dictates and bring China, the world’s manufacturing centre and source of vast profits extracted through the exploitation of the Chinese working class, under the sway of the Wall Street banks and corporations. The Australian ruling elite, as it has throughout its history, hopes to gain a share of the spoils by supporting the predatory agenda of its great power ally.

US imperialism is not only prepared to risk nuclear war. It has drawn up elaborate plans to launch such a catastrophe if Beijing does not capitulate to its demands. The critical task facing the working class in Australia, the US, China and across Asia is to build a unified international anti-war movement to put an end to capitalism and the nation-state system, and establish world socialism.



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