

US, Australia talks portend military provocation against China

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The annual US-Australia ministerial talks (Ausmin), held this year in Boston, concluded last night with the release of a communiqué spelling out the geo-political and economic agenda of the two countries. For the first time, the document has explicitly named Chinese activity as being of “strong concerns.” The decision to do so is confirmation that the US and its Australian ally intend to provoke a major incident by deploying military assets to challenge China’s sovereignty claims over islets and reefs in the South China Sea.

The high-level talks involved US Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, and Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and newly-appointed Defence Minister Marise Payne. The communiqué stated: “They expressed strong concerns over recent Chinese land reclamation and construction activity in the South China Sea. They called on all claimants to halt land reclamation, construction and militarization. They urged claimants to exercise restraint, take steps to ease tensions and refrain from provocative actions that could escalate tensions.”

The assertion by the US and Australia that China is the source of the tensions and “provocative actions” turns reality on its head. The US “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which President Obama formally initiated in the Australian parliament in 2011, has consisted of continuous diplomatic, economic and military efforts to undermine Chinese influence and reassert American dominance over the region. Washington has seized upon China’s longstanding territorial disputes with other countries in the South China Sea to encourage the Philippines and Vietnam to aggressively assert their claims and forge closer relations with the US. Washington and its allies, particularly Japan and Australia, are justifying a military build-up on the pretext that Beijing is trying to impose control over one

of the world’s busiest sea lanes and threatening “freedom of navigation.”

The Ausmin meeting took place in the wake of carefully-timed leaks to the British *Financial Times* and US *Navy Times* that the Obama administration is poised to authorise sending US warships or aircraft into the 12-nautical-mile exclusion zone that surrounds Chinese-claimed territory where Beijing has been reclaiming land from the sea and building air strips and other facilities. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter arrogantly stated during the Ausmin press conference that the US “will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as we do around the world, and the South China Sea is not and will not be an exception.”

Canberra parrots Washington’s line that while Australia does not “take sides” in regards to territorial claims in the South China Sea it asserts, as a matter of “national interest,” the right of “freedom of navigation” in Chinese-claimed waters. The government of recently-installed Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has not indicated whether it would dispatch Australian military forces to participate in a blatant provocation against Beijing. The Ausmin communiqué, however, is an undertaking that Australia will support the US in whatever it does and whatever the consequences. It is a further signal that, with his elevation to prime minister, Turnbull has put aside the concerns and criticisms he had raised in the past about the US “pivot.”

The US and Australia restated their commitment to their trilateral military partnership with Japan, and to drawing India ever more closely into their anti-China posture in the Indo-Pacific. As part of its alliance undertakings to Washington, the Turnbull government pledged to continue Australian military operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, as part of US-led

interventions. The Ausmin communiqué also ritualistically condemned “Russian aggression in Ukraine” and “welcomed” the findings of a Dutch investigation that Flight MH17 had been shot down by a Russian-made BUK missile system—implicitly accusing Moscow of responsibility.

The US and Australian officials all lauded the initial agreement struck this month to establish the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade bloc, which excludes and will apply immense pressure against China. Foreign minister Julie Bishop hailed the TPP as “the economic manifestation of the rebalance, and Australia is proud to be a part of this process.”

The Chinese embassy in Australia reacted to the Ausmin talks with a sharp statement of condemnation of the Turnbull government, indicating alarm in Chinese ruling circles. It wrote to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation yesterday: “It would be more helpful if they could honour their commitment of not taking sides on relevant disputes and do more to promote regional peace and stability in the true sense of the words rather than light a fire and add fuel to the flames.”

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson in Beijing declared that “certain countries have been flexing military muscles in the South China Sea over recent period of times. That is the biggest cause of ‘militarization’ in the South China Sea. The Chinese side is severely concerned about that.”

The hawkish Chinese state-run *Global Times* editorialised today that “China may face a grave test imposed by Washington’s escalation of tensions.” It concluded: “If Washington wants to prove it can keep its military edge in China’s offshore areas, then let it come ... The South China Sea is not a place where countries can act wantonly. Rules should be jointly made by all stakeholders, and US military ships cannot dominate the region. Washington has overestimated the effect of its military prowess.”

A reckless US operation in the South China Sea could trigger a military confrontation with China with far-reaching consequences. If Beijing simply submitted, its historical sovereignty claims would be effectively rendered worthless. If Washington backed away in the face of Chinese demands that its vessels or aircraft leave “Chinese territory,” its hubris that the US Navy “will go anywhere” would suffer a shipwreck. Even a

minor engagement could rapidly escalate into a full-scale conflict between nuclear armed powers.

Preparation for war with China has been the unstated axis of the US-Australia military alliance since Obama announced the “pivot” and it was fully endorsed by the Labor Party government of prime minister Julia Gillard in November 2011.

This year’s Ausmin talks included further commitments to more frequent “training and exercises”—euphemisms for short-term basing—of US troops, ships and aircraft in Australia. While not mentioned explicitly in the communiqué, discussions are ongoing between the US and Australian governments on the possibility of basing an entire aircraft carrier battle group in an Australian port and “rotating” long-range bombers out of northern Australian airfields.

In the event of war with China, US military planners envisage Australian bases being used to maintain a naval blockade of the key sea lanes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and cut off Chinese imports of oil, raw materials and other commodities.



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