

US Air Force to boost presence in northern Australian bases

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Speaking in Canberra yesterday, US General Lori Robinson confirmed that high-level talks are underway to boost the presence of long-range American bombers at Australian air bases in the Northern Territory. The deployment is part of the US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region, which is integral to the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" directed against China.

Robinson, who is commander of the US Pacific Air Forces, provided few details, saying: "We're in the process of talking about rotational forces, bombers and tankers out of Australia." As to whether that means B-1 supersonic bombers and B-52 strategic bombers, she said: "[W]e are still working through the details."

B-52 bombers already routinely fly into Australian air bases in the Northern Territory. In late 2012, a B-2 stealth bomber, the most sophisticated US bomber aircraft, made a little publicised stopover in Darwin.

Last year, US Assistant Secretary of Defence David Shear triggered denials from the Australian government when he told a Congressional hearing that the Pentagon would be placing additional air assets in Australia, including "B-1 bombers and surveillance aircraft." Robinson has now confirmed that is precisely what is being discussed.

The B-1 bomber can carry the largest weapons payload of any US plane, including cruise missiles and GPS-guided precision bombs. It has been extensively deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and has been adapted to launch air-to-sea missiles that can destroy ships from hundreds of kilometres.

The US general maintained the fiction that the US Air Force was "rotating," not basing, its war planes in northern Australia. However, the distinction is meaningless if the Pentagon can send its bombers to the Darwin and Tindal air bases in northern Australia

whenever it decides, and keep them there for extended periods.

Robinson made no bones about the real purpose of the expanded presence. She insisted that the US and its partners had to "maintain a credible combat power" in Asia, citing in particular "the seriousness of tone that is being set by China's militarisation of the South China Sea." Washington has been waging a relentless propaganda campaign over the past year, inflating the supposed threat posed by China's land reclamation and "militarisation" of atolls and reefs under its administration in the South China Sea.

The US navy has engaged in deliberately provocative "freedom of navigation" operations by sending destroyers within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-controlled islets last October and again this January. Last December the US Air Force provoked an angry reaction from Beijing when a nuclear-capable B-52 bomber flew within the territorial limit of Chinese-administered Cuarteron Reef, then claimed the intrusion was accidental.

"As we watch the increase in military capability on those islands, whether it's the missiles or the 10,000-foot runways, we will continue to do as we have always done, that is to fly and sail in international airspace," Robinson said, adding: "I would say that we would encourage anyone in the region and around the world to fly and sail in international airspace in accordance with international norms."

There is no doubt that Australia is at the top of the list of regional powers that Washington wants to challenge China's territorial claims. Robinson's remarks are just the latest salvo in the pressure being brought to bear on the Australian government and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to mount a "freedom of navigation" operation in the South China Sea.

Like other US officials, Robinson diplomatically refers to “anyone in the region.” However, the opposition Labor Party’s defence spokesman Stephen Conroy, acting as the conduit for the Pentagon’s demands, has publicly condemned the Turnbull government for failing to stand up to China’s “bullying” by intruding into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne remained non-committal, both about a military intervention in the South China Sea, and the basing of B-1 bombers in Australia. She simply noted that the Enhanced Air Cooperation Initiative, begun under the previous Labor government, provided for “increased rotations of US Air Force elements through northern Australia.”

Speaking in Beijing on the side-lines of annual National People’s Congress, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi countered US accusations, declaring: “Based on the joint efforts of China and other regional countries, the South China Sea is currently one of the safest and freest shipping lanes in the world.”

China has no interest in blocking the shipping lanes on which it depends heavily to import energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. Its limited military presence and land reclamation activities have been in response to US efforts since 2010 to inflame territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a means of driving a wedge between China and its neighbours.

In a pointed remark directed at Washington, Wang declared that freedom of navigation does not equal the “freedom to run amok.” Last week, in a menacing challenge to Beijing, the US navy sent the aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis, along with its associated strike group of warships, for four days of operations in the South China Sea.

The basing of sophisticated long-range bombers, and up to 2,500 US Marines, in northern Australia is one element of US preparations for war with China. The Pentagon regards Australia as a key base of operations, along with Japan, South Korea and Guam, for its AirSea Battle strategy, which involves a massive air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland supplemented by a blockade of shipping lanes through South East Asia.

General Robinson also expressed concern about Russia’s growing military presence in the Asia Pacific region. While Russia had eased back on its long-range

air patrols in Europe, she said, its reconnaissance aircraft were appearing more frequently over Asia. “We have seen Russian long-range aviation through the Pacific, circumnavigating Japan and circumnavigating Guam,” the general noted.

Given Washington’s constant drumbeat about “freedom of navigation and over flight,” Robinson had to acknowledge that the Russian aircraft were in international airspace and had every right to carry out such operations. Nevertheless, by highlighting Russia’s presence in Asia, she made clear that the aim of the US “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia is to ensure continued US dominance, not only in Asia but across Eurasia.

Behind the backs of the Australian people, successive Labor and Coalition governments are transforming the continent into a base of US operations as Washington prepares to further escalate its reckless and provocative confrontation with two nuclear-armed powers.



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