

Singapore expands military training in Australia

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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong last week announced a dramatic expansion of Singaporean military training in Australian facilities, as well as a strengthening of economic relations. Despite official denials by both governments, the agreement is clearly directed against China, amid rising US-generated tensions over the South China Sea.

The ruling elites of both countries are boosting their militaries and strategic ties as part of Washington's "pivot to Asia" geo-political strategy to encircle China, while trying to protect their own predatory interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

The military agreement will begin to operate in 2017. It will more than double the number of Singapore's troops training in Australia each year, from 6,000 to 14,000. Singapore will spend \$US1.7 billion to expand facilities at the Shoalwater Bay Training Area and the Townsville Field Training Area in the northeastern Australian state of Queensland.

Singaporean troops have been training in the area since 1990. Under the new arrangement, Singapore's military will have access to the bases from February to May, and August to November, for "unilateral land training." Singapore and the US are the only two countries building such facilities in Australia, and both are expanding them substantially.

A *Wall Street Journal* article noted: "Under the deal, the Southeast Asian city-state will follow the US in beefing up military ties with Canberra and using Australia's vast training areas to carry out military exercises. The US Marines and US Air Force have been expanding their footprints in the northern Australian port of Darwin as part of Washington's rebalance of forces to the Asia-Pacific region."

Singapore stands abreast the sea routes carrying one

third of all global maritime trade annually. The island state is vital to the Pentagon's anti-China military strategy, originally labelled the AirSea Battle plan. This plan involves shutting off China's energy and trade routes to the Middle East, Europe and Africa, in cooperation with Singapore and Australia as part of a broader anti-China alliance involving Japan and India.

Prime Minister Turnbull described the agreement as a "landmark deal" and a "massive upgrading of our relationship with Singapore." Questioned by journalists, he sought to downplay the anti-China character of the agreement, anxious to keep the military implications buried during the campaign for Australia's July 2 federal election. "We've had a close strategic relationship with Singapore for many years and this will be seen around the region as a natural development from the strong relationship we have," Turnbull said.

Singaporean ministers, however, were more blunt. Prime Minister Lee emphasised: "Defence cooperation will be stepped up." Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said the deal would set economic and military ties with Australia on a "completely new trajectory," accompanied by greater sharing of intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation. It showed the "alignment" in the way both countries viewed the world.

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said greater access to Australia's training areas was a "wish come true!" The agreement would "sharpen" Singapore's armed forces into "one of the most well-trained and proficient militaries in the region." Last month, he told parliament that "rising nationalism" was driving Singapore's increased defence spending. He pointed to "this troubled peace around us," a reference to disputes in the South China Sea.

To any imperialist power operating in the East Asian-

Indian Ocean area, Singapore has always been vital. When the island, Britain's bastion in the Far East, was lost in February 1942 to Japan, it signalled the end of Britain's empire. Today, Singapore has the biggest military budget in South East Asia, spending \$9.4 billion last year.

The small island, effectively a one-party state dominated by Lee's People's Action Party, with a population of just 5.67 million, has 72,000 regular armed force members, of whom 45,800 are conscripts, and 950,000 active reserves.

Encouraged by the US, Singapore has been ramping up its military spending, from about \$8 billion in 2011 to an expected \$10.7 billion within five years, funding new warplanes, attack submarines, patrol ships and helicopters, as well as naval military transports, thus projecting a regional military presence.

Singapore has granted Washington the right to base four naval frigates, designed for operations in the South China Sea, and to fly P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft from the island, thus covering the entire area in which the Pentagon is challenging Beijing's territorial claims.

Peter Jennings, executive director of the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said the "very positive" agreement was motivated on Singapore's side by concerns that the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was struggling to respond to the heightened frictions in the South China Sea. "They wouldn't say this publicly but they are concerned about ASEAN's inability to come up with a coherent and consistent response to China," he said.

Washington has provoked these tensions by encouraging ASEAN members, particularly, Vietnam and the Philippines, to confront China over its claims in the South China Sea, and by reestablishing US bases in the Philippines. Indonesia has begun to expand its maritime and military forces and Malaysia has increased military cooperation with the US. In every case, Washington is urging higher military spending in its determination to stop China developing as strategic rival to US hegemony in East Asia.

The uncertain outcome of the American presidential elections and its possible effect on US foreign policy have given added impetus to regional powers seeking to protect their interests with bilateral security deals. Global economic stagnation is further fueling the geopolitical anxieties.

At the centre of the Turnbull government's election campaign "economic plan" is a "military industry plan" of building submarines and warships. Altogether, annual defence expenditure will rise to \$A59 billion by 2025–26, with an emphasis on the navy and air force. Total military spending will be at least \$A495 billion over the next decade. This will enable Australia to play a key role in the AirSea Battle plan and, in the event of war, block vital trade routes to China, including those through Indonesia's Sunda and Lombok straits.

Regardless of whether Turnbull's Liberal-National Coalition or the Labor Party heads the next government, this expansion is to be paid for by sweeping cuts to public education, health care, wages and social welfare. It was the previous Labor government, with the support of the Greens, which agreed to US basing rights in northern Australia, the rotation of US marines in Darwin and the flying of strategic US bombers out of the northern city.

In announcing the Singapore deal, Turnbull cynically focused on the supposed "construction boom" to be provided by the city-state's spending on the military bases in the Townsville region. "This is all part of our economic plan that builds on the Coalition's Northern Australia Policy and the Defence White Paper," he declared.

The collapse of the mining boom has produced severe job losses in Townsville and throughout Queensland, where the government is desperate to cling onto parliamentary seats in the July 2 election.

The reality, which is being hidden from public view as much as possible, is that the expansion of the Queensland bases is another expression of the increasing transformation of the Asia-Pacific region by the US and its allies into a militarised tinderbox.



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