

Australian establishment discusses prospect of US-China war

James Cogan
1 September 2016

A report by the US-based RAND Corporation in early August has sparked renewed discussion among strategic analysts in Australia on the prospects and consequences of a war between the US and China. The most striking feature of the views expressed in these circles is that they accept RAND's conclusion that war is highly possible.

The RAND report was headlined "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable." In the context of rising tensions between Washington and Beijing, it assessed four scenarios of a conflict, based on combinations of "mild" or "severe" intensity and short or protracted duration. It contrasted the impact if the war had been fought in 2015 compared with one fought in 2025. Based on highly questionable assumptions, the report discounted the prospect of a conflict escalating to the use of nuclear weapons. It recommended that war had to be prepared for, and implied that the longer the conflict was delayed, the more catastrophic it would be for the United States (see: "RAND Corporation lays out scenarios for US war with China").

Australian imperialism is bound to the US by the ANZUS military alliance. Australia hosts some of the most critical US satellite, communications and spying bases. It provides access to northern Australian airbases for long-range US bombers and naval bases are regularly visited by US warships and submarines. Since November 2011, when the Obama administration launched its "pivot to Asia" in the Australian parliament, a contingent of US marines has been based for six months of the year in the northern city of Darwin. The extent of the military ties and integration poses the prospect of direct Australian involvement in any US conflict with China, its largest trading partner and export market.

Since the RAND report was published, it has been

reviewed by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), the Lowy Institute and by foreign policy analysts writing for the Murdoch-owned press, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Fairfax media.

The August 23 review by ASPI, authored by Mike Scafton, a former defence official and advisor to the Howard Liberal Party government (1996–2007), began with the question "under what circumstances would Australia join in a war against China?"

Scafton drew from the RAND report: "Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper says that 'a major conflict between the United States and China is unlikely.' Maybe so, but the US is preparing for a high intensity battle." He asked: "Is Australia now inextricably entwined with the US military planning in East Asia—because of ANZUS, or as a consequence of US expectations created through combined planning, capability cooperation, intelligence sharing and exercising, and US basing?" He concluded that "it would be politically difficult for any Australian government not to join [a US-led war with China] in most circumstances."

Scafton ended his comment by noting the "ruinous consequences for Australia and the region of a calamitous war." In conclusion, he suggested: "The government might be inclined to elevate the avoidance of an East Asian war to the highest national interest. And to make it the prime objective of Australia's foreign policy."

An August 24 review by the Lowy Institute, authored by Crispin Rovere, a Labor Party figure and commentator on nuclear policy issues, was even more alarmed.

Rovere dismissed RAND's arguments that nuclear weapons would not be used in a major war as "dubious

assumptions.” He described RAND’s assertions that the US economy could withstand the impact of such a war as “unrealistic” and its assessment that political stability would break down in China in the event of a prolonged conflict as “wishful thinking.”

Rovere also dismissed the report’s conclusion that land forces would not become involved as “incorrect.” He pointed to the prospect of a Chinese-backed attack by North Korea on South Korea that would compel the US to come to the South’s aid. As a result, “hundreds of thousands of US land forces would be engaged against an enormous number of enemy combatants, supported by vulnerable supply lines in highly contested waters near the Chinese mainland. Indeed, it is perfectly likely a war that started in the Spratlys could be lost by the US at Busan.”

Rovere concluded: “[I]t is entirely possible that in a lengthy high-intensity conflict, economic losses would be equivalent, decisive military engagements would be elusive, and China’s post-war recovery would be faster.... The possibility of a Chinese strategic victory in 2025 or beyond cannot be excluded.” He did not point out that such a possibility would make the use of nuclear weapons more or less inevitable.

Concern over Australia’s ties to the United States was the theme of a speech delivered on August 30 by Paul Keating, the former Labor prime minister from 1991 to 1996. Since leaving parliament, Keating has built up a sizeable personal fortune, above all through business and connections in Asia. He currently holds an advisory position with the state-owned China Development Bank.

Keating told a seminar in Sydney sponsored by the Australia-China Relations Institute that “we can’t afford a world war” provoked by US-China tensions. Calling for a “nuanced foreign policy,” Keating asserted: “We can’t ever be caught up in some containment policy of China ... to assist the Americans in trying to preserve strategic hegemony in Asia and the Pacific.” US dominance in the Asia-Pacific, he declared, was “incapable of preservation” in the face of China’s economic expansion.

The stark reality of Australian foreign policy, however, is that it is based on involvement in the US preparations for war in Asia precisely to preserve its regional and global dominance against a perceived challenge from China.

While a debate is raging behind the scenes in ruling circles, every effort is being made to prevent workers and youth from understanding the very real dangers of war and its root cause that lies in the contradictions and crisis of global capitalism. In the recent July 2 Australian election, any discussion on the prospect of war with China was consciously suppressed by all the pro-capitalist parties and the media and raised only by the candidates of the Socialist Equality Party.

In opposition to the war preparations being made by the ruling class, the SEP insisted that the working class had to develop its own response—the fight for a unified international anti-war movement based on the working class and the program of socialist internationalism.

The author recommends:

Socialism and the Fight Against War: Build an International Movement of the Working Class and Youth Against Imperialism!

Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International

[18 February 2016]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact