

US seals military basing deal with Australia

Mike Head

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Amid rising tensions with China and Russia, the Obama administration last week finalised an “in-principle” agreement with the Australian government that clears the way for a major expansion of US use of Australia as a base for troops, bombers and warships.

Under intense pressure from Washington, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government struck a cost-sharing pact that will mean billions of dollars being spent by both countries on upgrading facilities in Darwin and elsewhere across Australia, including airstrips and barracks, for the US military.

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

Washington’s push to seal the Australian deal escalated as Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte threatened to end joint exercises with the US in the South China Sea, and repudiate the agreement signed by his predecessor, Benigno Aquino, to establish US bases in the Philippines.

The Pentagon was also reportedly anxious to sign off on the agreement before the US presidential election, given the possibility of a victory by the populist demagogue Donald Trump, who has threatened to withdraw US forces from some locations, or force host nations to pay the full costs of maintaining them.

The arrangement announced by US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne in Washington consummates a pact first made by the previous Labor government, under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, in 2011. That agreement was reached during a visit to Australia by President Barack Obama. He used the Australian

parliament to formally announce the US “pivot” to Asia, directed at reasserting American hegemony over the region against China’s rising influence.

At a press conference in the US capital last Thursday, Payne refused to disclose any details of what she termed an “important milestone.” She said the US would “in large” fund a \$2.5 billion Integrated Investment Program, and the two governments would share additional ongoing annual costs over 25 years. She spoke vaguely of infrastructure “dedicated to airfields, to aprons, to accommodation, to gyms, to messes, those sorts of things.”

Payne declared that the agreement would remain a “confidential document,” thus keeping the full scale of the war preparations secret from both the American and Australian populations. She confirmed that the annual US Marine deployment to Darwin, currently 1,250 soldiers, would double to 2,500 by 2020, the full size originally agreed by the Gillard government.

Carter issued a perfunctory press release, welcoming “the conclusion of negotiations over ... cost sharing for the force posture initiatives in northern Australia” and emphasising “the importance of that cooperation” to the US-Australia alliance.

Carter’s reference was to the Force Posture Agreement signed at the 2014 Australia-United States Ministerial Meeting, which provided for increased joint training and exercises, deeper “interoperability” of the two armed forces and “broader collaboration between Australia, the United States and our partners in the Indo-Pacific.”

In March this year, the two governments discussed basing US long-range B-1 bombers in Darwin. These can carry the largest weapons payload of any US plane, including cruise missiles and GPS-guided precision bombs. B-1s, extensively deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, have been adapted to launch air-to-sea missiles that can destroy ships from hundreds of

kilometres, making them critical for any blockade of Chinese trade routes.

The Murdoch media praised the Turnbull government for finally agreeing on the cost-sharing deal. Dennis Shanahan, political editor of the *Australian*, said it “guarantees the full potential for President Barack Obama’s military ‘pivot in Asia,’” with its “vision of effectively basing a battalion of troops in Australia to anchor a rapid response to crises in Asia.”

The newspaper’s foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, who has close ties in Washington, said the deal was “ludicrously overdue,” essentially criticising the Liberal-National government, first under Tony Abbott then Turnbull, for delaying the finalisation of the agreements made by Gillard.

Sheridan indicated the strategic importance of the agreement for plans for war against China. He wrote: “For the US, the deployments represent not only the living, breathing implementation of Barack Obama’s Asia pivot strategy, but a longer-term plan to disperse its forces across the Asia-Pacific, especially to decentralise them from two islands, Okinawa and Guam, where they are at least potentially vulnerable to pre-emptive missile attack.”

Just after the Turnbull government narrowly survived the July 2 federal election, US Vice President Joe Biden made a four-day visit to the country, designed to impress on the government the need to step up Australia’s involvement in the US military challenge to China. In public remarks, he aggressively warned of the perils of “betting against” the US military.

In addition to an enlarged US Marines facility in Darwin, Washington has previously pushed for greater access to naval ports and expanded airstrip capacity on Australia’s Cocos Island territories in the Indian Ocean.

Already the US controls two key, nominally “joint,” bases in Australia. In 2008-10, the Labor government agreed that the North West Cape base, originally a nuclear submarine communication station, would be upgraded with an advanced space warfare radar and telescope. Pine Gap, in central Australia, which has grown from three antennae in 1970 to 33 today, is critical for tracking satellite and mobile phone transmissions for identifying bombing targets and conducting wars in the region and the Middle East.

Other bases for US operations are the Defence

Satellite Communication Station at Geraldton in Western Australia, along with Kojarena 20 kilometres inland, which are part of the US-led global Five Eyes surveillance system. The US also has access to the Delamere Air Weapons range and the Bradshaw Ranges in the Northern Territory and the training facility at Shoalwater Bay in Queensland.

By some estimates, there are effectively almost 50 joint bases across Australia, since the US can use all Australian bases in any “emergency.”

Australia’s role as a staging ground for US war plans will be further underscored when Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addresses a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament on Wednesday. His visit will cement a \$2 billion base expansion agreement under which 14,000 Singaporean troops will rotate through Queensland every year.

Despite denials by the two governments, the agreement is clearly directed against China. The ruling elites of both countries are boosting their militaries and strategic ties as part of Washington’s geo-political strategy to encircle China, while trying to protect their own predatory interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Singapore has granted Washington the right to base four littoral combat ships, designed for operations in the contested waters of the South China Sea, and to fly P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft from the island, thereby covering the entire area in which the Pentagon is challenging Beijing’s territorial claims.

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