Report signals renewed US pressure on Australia to line up against China

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A report released last week by the United States Study Centre at Sydney University underscores the centrality of the Australian alliance to the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" against China. It examines potential risks to the alliance, raising concerns, in particular, about the lack of public support for the US military build-up in Asia.

Entitled "Against Complacency: Risks and Opportunities for the Australia-US Alliance," the report is written by Richard Fontaine, president of the Centre for a New American Security and former adviser to US Senator John McCain, known for his hardline militarism. Fontaine spent four months as a fellow this year at the US Studies Centre as part of its Alliance 21 Program, designed to boost US-Australian ties.

The report focusses on the impact of China's efforts to use its economic clout to counter the US "pivot"—a comprehensive diplomatic offensive and military build-up throughout the Asia Pacific region aimed at continued American pre-eminence. While the report is preoccupied with the Australia-US alliance, it reflects wider concerns in American ruling circles that the "pivot" is stalling, particularly given the uncertainty being generated in Asia by the American presidential elections.

Fontaine identifies "American decline, denial or dysfunction" as one of the key risks to the Australian alliance. He notes that the view that the US is in long-term relative decline and ambivalent about its commitments to Asia "is today increasingly common across the region." That sentiment in ruling circles is compounded by the fact that both US presidential contenders—Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump—have publicly opposed the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) which was designed to consolidate American economic predominance over China.

The fears in Washington have been confirmed by the foreign policy shift made by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who publicly declared during his visit to Beijing last week that he was "separating" from Washington in order to pursue closer ties with China. He was rewarded with billions of dollars in Chinese loans and investment. The US is concerned that other countries, including close allies like Australia, could follow suit.

Fontaine notes that despite US urging, the Australian government has not conducted a "freedom of navigation" operation in the South China Sea, and has taken decisions, such as the leasing of a commercial port in Darwin, in northern Australia, to a Chinese corporation, that have angered Washington. He suggests that Canberra should project a more aggressive stance, and "react more strongly than Beijing expects to its incremental actions, even if that reaction invites economic punishment."

As the report explains, Washington regards Australia as a central component of its accelerating US war drive against China, figuring "more prominently in the thinking of American policymakers than at any time since the Second World War… With Britain's troubles in Europe, observers in both countries have begun to describe the alliance as the Anglosphere's new 'special relationship.'"

Fontaine points to the risk posed to the US-Australia alliance by those in Australian ruling circles who have raised concerns about being too closely integrated with the Pentagon's war drive against China. Referring to domestic Australian politics, Fontaine identifies political figures such as former Labor foreign minister Bob Carr, who has declared that "it's not in our interests to slide into war with our major trading partner if there is a flare-up about uninhabited islands."

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Fontaine, however, is concerned, above all, about the gulf between the political establishment and the Australian population, which has been kept in the dark about US-led war preparations. “The gap between public opinion and the national security elite—and between popular opinion and government policy—presents a risk to the alliance, since it is not inevitable that elite views will always trump popular views when the two clash,” the report states.

It notes a recent US Studies Centre poll that found that respondents viewed the US as just as much of a threat as China, and were more likely to support a strong Australian relationship with China than with the US. Eighty percent thought that America’s “best years” were in the past. Among young people, more than half said that China was their country’s most important relationship, compared to just 35 percent for the United States.

Fontaine underscores Washington’s concerns by citing Australian analyst Rory Medcalf: “Perhaps the only thing that is certain is that governments in Canberra and Washington can no longer assume that the Australian public will go along with whatever policy decisions officials and political leaders reach, when it comes to the shape of the alliance or the way it operates in an increasingly contested Asia.”

The US Studies Centre was established specifically in response to the widespread opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, expressed in the largest-ever anti-war protests in Australian history in cities and towns across the country.

Fontaine calls for greater efforts by policy makers to explain the implications of “Chinese revisionism” and to counter Chinese “soft power.” His remarks echo a recent scare campaign whipped up by the Australian media and politicians against Chinese “influence peddling,” which implied that figures like Bob Carr constituted a fifth column acting in Beijing’s interests.

Fontaine is oblivious to the obvious hypocrisy of criticising Chinese influence from his position as an Alliance 21 Fellow at the US Studies Centre—a fellowship announced in November 2014 by the White House to allow American policy analysts to “immerse themselves in Australia.” The Alliance 21 program’s sponsors include Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, US arms manufacturer Northrop Grumman, US chemical conglomerate Dow, and the Australian government. This is just one indicator of the enormous influence that Washington wields in Australian domestic politics.

As well as outlining the risks to the US-Australia alliance, the report makes clear Washington’s new demands for greater Australian military and strategic integration into the “pivot.” These include “expanded access arrangements for US naval vessels in Australia,” including making the Stirling naval base in Western Australia the home port for an entire US aircraft carrier strike group, and the expansion of amphibious military exercises that could be used to project Marine units into East Asia.

Fontaine also calls for greater Australian efforts to establish closer military ties in Asia as part of Washington’s broader efforts to encircle China with US allies and strategic partners. He specifically calls for stronger relations with Indonesia, Japan, India and New Zealand and for a revival of a “quadrilateral” military partnership involving the US, Australia, Japan and India.

Fontaine’s report underscores the fact that the US is prepared to intervene, both publicly and covertly, into Australian politics to ensure that Canberra lines up against Beijing to ensure continued American dominion over the Asia Pacific region. This will involve every available means, including military threats, provocations and, ultimately, war.

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