

Australian foreign policy White Paper underscores danger of war

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The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper released on November 23 by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government is another indication of global crisis and uncertainty, severe geo-political tensions and the escalating drive to war in Asia and other parts of the world. It is the first comprehensive official document on Australian foreign policy since 2003.

As a middle-order imperialist power, Australia has always relied on a more powerful ally—first Britain, then after 1941 the United States—to prosecute its economic and strategic interests. However, the relative decline of the US and the economic rise of China are undermining the post-World War II framework in which Washington was the primary power.

While the white paper is written in bland official language, it nevertheless reflects the rising anxieties in ruling circles over the breakdown of the post-war order and the emergence of “a more competitive and contested world.” While the US had been the dominant power in the region since World War II, “today China is challenging America's position.”

The document warns: “Navigating the decade ahead will be hard because, as China's power grows, our region is changing in ways without precedent in Australia's modern history.” The fundamental dilemma confronting Australian capitalism—how to balance between the US, its long-term strategic ally, and China, now its largest trading partner—has reached a turning point.

The mantra repeated by successive governments over the past decade—Australia does not have to choose between the US and China—has been shelved. The document insists that Australian interests depend on maintaining US global dominance, stating: “International challenges can only be tackled effectively when the world's wealthiest, most

innovative and most powerful country is engaged in solving them.”

The limited ability of Canberra to manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing was underscored by the 2010 ousting of Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. It amounted to an internal coup by a handful of powerbrokers, later revealed by WikiLeaks to be “protected sources of the US embassy. Rudd's “crime,” as far as the US was concerned, was to argue for a compromise with China when the Obama administration was ratcheting up a confrontation under its “pivot to Asia.”

The white paper backs the expansion of subsequent military ties with the US, and Australia's closer and closer integration into the Pentagon's war plans against China. This includes opening up northern Australian bases to American Marines, warships and military aircraft. “Our alliance with the United States is central to Australia's security and sits at the core of our strategic and defence planning,” the paper states.

While the document declares that the government is “committed to strong and constructive ties” with China and a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Beijing, its pro-US stance is unmistakable. The paper echoes the belligerent stance taken by the Trump administration toward North Korea, warning that “a North Korean attack on the US would also trigger Australia's commitments under our ANZUS alliance.” In other words, Australia automatically would be involved in any US-led war against North Korea—a conflict that could lead to war with China.

The paper also backs Washington's aggressive intervention into the territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and its neighbours, under the bogus banner of “freedom of navigation.” Australia, it declares, “is particularly concerned by the

unprecedented pace and scale of China’s activities” and “opposes the use of disputed features and artificial structures in the South China Sea for military purposes.” Canberra has supported the Pentagon’s provocative “freedom of navigation” operations, in which US warships have directly intruded into Chinese claimed-waters, threatening a military clash.

China’s response to the white paper has been relatively muted. However, on the South China Sea, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Kang declared that it was China’s hope that “Australia will stop issuing these irresponsible remarks, especially when ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] countries have reached consensus.”

Analyst Michael Wesley, from the Australian National University, told the *Australian* that the white paper’s “language on China was more robust but was wound back.” Despite an escalating media witch-hunt over the past year against “Chinese influence” in Australian politics, the document does not name China when it expresses concern about “foreign interference.”

It states that “the government is concerned about growing attempts by foreign governments or their proxies to exert inappropriate influence on and to undermine Australia’s sovereign institutions and decision-making.” Given the current furore over Chinese “agents of influence” in Australia, the white paper’s meaning is clear.

Canberra nevertheless has two significant fears about US foreign policy. The first is that Washington could pull back from the Asia Pacific, leaving Australia and other allies to fend for themselves. As the white paper states, the government recognises “greater debate and uncertainty” in the US about the costs of its involvement, but argues that US engagement is in Washington’s own interests.

The government is boosting its military ties and diplomatic support for Washington, in part to ensure continued US involvement in Asia. At the same time, it is developing relations with countries throughout the region, in particular Japan and India. While the establishment of the so-called quad—the US, Japan, Australia and India—is an element of America’s anti-China strategy, it is also a means for Australia to become less reliant on the US, should Washington pull back. For similar reasons, the document calls for a more robust Australian intervention in the South West

Pacific, which Canberra traditionally has regarded as its sphere of influence.

That said, the Trump administration has been ramping up its economic and strategic challenges to China throughout the Indo-Pacific, not retreating into American isolationism. Trump’s aggressive trade war policies are the second major concern in Canberra. Already Trump has pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), significantly impacting on the economic interests of allies such as Japan and Australia. Without mentioning Trump, the paper states that Australia will work with other TPP partners to try to salvage elements of the deal.

The white paper devotes an entire section to “defending and supporting an open global economy” as essential for Australian trade and economic interests. Again without a reference to Trump, it warns about the dangers of rising protectionism. At the same time, the paper states that while China is Australia’s top trading partner, the US is still of “systemic importance to the global economy.” Australia remains heavily dependent on US investment and the American financial system.

The *Australian*’s editor-at-large and pompous pundit Paul Kelly criticises the white paper, saying it “is based on a grand paradox—it warns that Australia faces the most unprecedented risks in its modern history, but then proposes a series of conventional, constructive but orthodox solutions.” However, in the course of the lengthy discourse that follows, Kelly has nothing to offer by way of an alternative.

The unstated fear in ruling circles is that the rising geo-political tensions through Asia and the world, the escalation of trade war measures, and the increasingly aggressive provocations and military threats, above all by the US, are leading to a catastrophic war involving the major nuclear powers. The pro-US thrust of the white paper underlines what is already evident: if US imperialism launches a war, Australia is totally committed and automatically will be involved.



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