Former US Navy secretary calls Australia the "tip of the spear" against China

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In comments to the *Australian* newspaper published yesterday, Richard Spencer, a former US Navy secretary, described Australia as the "tip of the spear" of the US-led confrontation with China. He called for greater integration of Australian personnel into the US Navy's key strike capabilities.

These statements, which were prominently featured by the Murdoch-owned publication, form part of an increasingly feverish discussion on the need to accelerate Australia's militarisation as the US intensifies plans for a war against China. Each week, current and former political and military leaders insist on the need for northern Australia to be placed on a war footing as they emphasise the critical role of the Pacific in the catastrophic conflict they are preparing.

Spencer was US Navy secretary under President Donald Trump from 2017 to 2019. He undoubtedly retains connections to the military-intelligence apparatus and currently works for Bondi Partners, a strategic advisory firm founded by Joe Hockey, former Australian ambassador to the US.

Spencer was speaking specifically on the plans for Australia to establish a fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines under last year's AUKUS pact with Britain and the US. He decried the prospect of delayed acquisition of the subs, which would not be ready until the 2040s if they were to be built from scratch in Australia.

Spencer stated: "I believe it is difficult to say, 'We are your ally and we are here to support you' when you are sitting at the tip of the spear but it's going to be 10 years until we deliver the critical piece of gear you need.'"

Spencer proposed placing Australian naval personnel on the US fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. The subs would be based or placed on an "extended deployment" in Australia and would be "patrolling specific Australian threat waters."

The former US official was not suggesting a token deployment of a handful of Australian personnel. Instead, according to the *Australian*, he "said it was vital Australians started training soon on Virginia-class submarines with a view to reaching 50 percent Australian and 50 percent US crews as soon as possible."

The *Australian* article was timed to coincide with a week-long visit to Western Australia by the USS Mississippi, part of the US nuclear submarine fleet. Its stopover, purportedly to provide the crew with rest, has been used to intensify discussion on the urgency of Australia acquiring its own fleet.

The *Australian* cited other possible "solutions" to the submarine time-lag. "The most likely interim options would be acquisition of several US Virginia-Class nuclear submarines off the production lines in the US as soon as possible," it stated.

"Another option" was "to provide a home base for several US Navy Virginia-class submarines in Perth, a move that would anger China and represent a quantum leap in naval co-operation between Australia and the US. The government is building a dry dock facility in Henderson, near Perth, which will be able to service large naval vessels including nuclear submarines.

"China last week elevated its opposition to the AUKUS pact, calling it a 'threat' to Australia's relationship with China and a danger to 'world peace.'"

Next month, the Labor government's foreign minister, Penny Wong, and defence minister, Richard Marles, will travel to Washington for annual AUSMIN talks with the Biden administration. The question of the nuclear submarines will clearly be a key item on the

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agenda.

A task force examining the options for acquiring nuclear submarines is due to report to the Labor government in March.

In the same month, the government is due to receive a report from a review into military capabilities being conducted by former Defence Minister Stephen Smith and ex-Defence Force chief Angus Houston. Officially, the review is being undertaken in response to "deteriorating regional security."

Marles and other government leaders have declared the need to vastly expand Australian military capabilities.

An interim report from the review was provided to the government last week. It was not publicly released, but the *Australian*'sforeign editor, Greg Sheridan, who has extensive ties to the military-intelligence establishment, indicated some of its content.

The review, he stated, would "call for a significant expansion, and perhaps hardening, of our northern air force bases. It will also call for the development of missile defences around some of them." This would be accompanied by a recommendation for a "big investment in missiles and drones."

Sheridan wrote that in the event of a "clash between the US and China," "Australia would furnish a dozen high-priority targets for Chinese attack." These targets would include air force and other military bases in northern Australia and the US Pine Gap spying and military coordination facility in the centre of the country.

The US and its allies frequently establish missile systems described as "defensive," when in fact their purpose is to conduct offensive operations. Missile systems in northern Australia, for instance, would be able to strike far into the Pacific.

This would be in line with the role that Australia is to play in a war with China as the staging ground for a naval blockade of key shipping lanes upon which Beijing heavily relies, and as a "southern anchor" for offensive operations throughout the region.

Sheridan said the review would also advocate "a fourth combat squadron of Joint Strike Fighter F-35s." He continued: "If we get this extra squadron, and maybe some extra training F-35s, and keep our Super Hornets and Growlers in service as we should, this would take us over the magic 100 fast-jet figure."

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation revealed last month that US B-52 bombers are to be stationed in northern Australia. The plans, not publicly announced, are well underway, with a major expansion of airforce infrastructure and fuelling facilities.

The B-52s are nuclear-capable. It is US policy not to reveal which of its nuclear-capable assets are carrying a nuclear payload at any given time. That means that Australia's status as a nuclear-free power effectively has been overturned.

In a further indication of the lockstep march of the Labor government behind the US confrontation with China, the *Australian* reported today that the government is considering measures to block Chinese investment from the country's critical minerals sector. Such actions, already undertaken by Canada, would be carried out on the basis of "national security," not economic considerations, the newspaper stated.

This aligns with US and allied fears concerning China's dominance over the processing of rare earths and critical minerals, which are crucial to nearly all modern technologies. As in the period before the first and second world wars, steps are being taken to "decouple" supply chains and establish control over key economic areas in preparation for conflict.

The vast expenditure on the military build-up occurs amid the greatest cost-of-living crisis in decades. The Labor government abandoned its May election campaign lies about a "better future" and has since declared the need for working people to make "sacrifices," including through real wage cuts and austerity measures that further cut health and other essential social services. As always, the drive to war abroad goes hand-in-hand with war against the working class at home.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality is holding an international webinar on December 11, 5am AEDT, titled: "For a mass movement of youth and students to stop the war in Ukraine!" Register for the webinar today.

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