

US hails Australia's bellicose defence review, China warns against military build-up

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27 April 2023

A Defence Strategic Review (DSR), calling for the largest Australian military build-up since World War II, has been greeted with rapture by the Biden administration and the US national security establishment. On the other side of the coin, China has warned against a militarisation of the Indo-Pacific, which could result in an open war.

The declassified version of the DSR was unveiled last Monday. It advocated a turn by the Australian military to “impactful projection” throughout the region, and openly linked this to the prospect of a major armed conflict. Concretely this means the provision of advanced missile systems to the army, air force and navy and the acquisition of nuclear-powered attack submarines.

The very day the review was released, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin took the unusual step of hailing the document and declaring his support for it. The rapidity of the response makes clear that the American state was heavily involved in the review.

Austin's statement underscored the extent to which Australia's military build-up is being driven forward by the demands of the US government and its confrontation with China. “The DSR demonstrates Australia's commitment to being at the forefront of incorporating new capabilities for the Australian Defence Force to better enable Australia to meet regional and global challenges, as well as to our Unbreakable Alliance, which has never been stronger,” he stated.

Austin wrote that “The DSR and the U.S. National Defense Strategy are strongly aligned...”

The Biden administration adopted the National Defense Strategy last December. It builds upon previous policy statements under the Trump administration, which proclaimed that “great power competition,” not terrorism, was the primary threat to US “national security.”

In the foreword to that document, Austin sketched out the strategy of American imperialism. It would confront Russia and China. In the context of the ongoing US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the Russian state was defined as an “immediate and sharp threat” to US interests.

But Austin identified China as the primary adversary, the only one “both with the intent to reshape the international order and increasingly the power to do so.” The strategy document itself branded China as the “most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security.”

The annual Department of Defence report for 2022, however, had acknowledged that China's sole military ambition was to “restrict the US from having a presence on China's periphery.” That is, to limit US military activities and an aggressive build-up within China's immediate vicinity. The real “threat” posed by China is that its substantial economic growth over recent decades threatens the preeminence of an American capitalism in protracted decline.

In responding to the DSR, this reality was pointed to by a spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry. They described China's military activities as “defensive” in character and added, “We hope certain countries will not use China as an excuse for military build-up and will refrain from hyping up the ‘China threat’ narrative.”

The Australian DSR is based on precisely such a narrative. It repeats US claims that China has engaged in the largest military build-up since World War II, and complains that this has been conducted without “transparency” or “reassurance” of “strategic intent.”

But there is simply no comparison between the ongoing US build-up, which furthers an unprecedented 80-year global military expansion, and the development of the Chinese defence forces.

The most recent Chinese budget, released earlier this year, earmarked roughly \$225 billion for defence expenditure. By contrast, the US budget request for the 2024 fiscal year allocated \$842 billion to the Department of Defense. With additional spends on other military-related government bodies, the American total is likely over a trillion for a single year.

China's population is 4.27 times larger than the US population. The latest annual defence spending represents \$159 per capita in China and \$2,544 in the US. As some

commentators have noted, a substantial portion of the Chinese defence budget funds its almost two-million strong standing army, which largely serves a domestic function, and could play only a limited role in a maritime war in the Indo-Pacific, fought with advanced missile systems, fighter jets, warships and submarines.

As a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), Chinese military spending is consistently beneath 2 percent, lower than in Australia and many other imperialist countries. In the US, the defence allocation is 3.7 percent of GDP, one of the highest of any advanced country in the world.

The US operates somewhere between 800 and 1,000 foreign military bases and defence installations. China has one formal overseas military base in Djibouti, Africa. In the Indo-Pacific, China does not have a single base outside its borders. The US has bases in at least South Korea, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, the Marshall Islands, Singapore, Australia, Hawaii and the British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia.

The DSR, while inverting this reality, tries desperately to manufacture a “threat” from China. It is, however, compelled to acknowledge that there is only the remotest of prospects that Australia will ever face an invasion. Instead, it warns that China could threaten trade and supply routes in the Indo-Pacific, hinting at the prospect of a military blockade.

But China is completely dependent on trade that passes through the maritime straits of the region, including with Australia. In 2016, for instance, an estimated 64 percent of Chinese maritime trade passed through the South China Sea. If China were to institute a blockade, it would be cutting off its own critical supplies of raw materials.

In reality, it is the US and its allies, including Australia, that have discussed the possibility of a naval blockade of the region, aimed at choking Chinese trade routes. That is an explicit component of the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle doctrine, first unveiled in 2010 and updated in 2015. To the extent that China has conducted military operations in the South China Sea, it has been a defensive reaction to this doctrine and the major military build-up that has accompanied it.

The DSR is thus based on the lies of the US government, used to justify its own aggressive war plans. The connections are not just ideological and political.

Increasingly, the US and Australian militaries are completely integrated, with overlapping leadership structures and command. Yesterday, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported: “According to documents which were provided by the Pentagon to Congress last month, dozens of retired US military figures have been granted approval to work for Australia since

2012.”

It explained that “In one instance, retired Admiral John Richardson, who headed the US Navy from 2015 to 2019, receives \$US5,000 a day as a part-time consultant under a contract with Australia’s defence department, struck last year.”

The documents also point to the role of James Clapper, the former director of the entirety of US national intelligence. In that role, Clapper infamously lied to Congress about the National Security Agency’s illegal mass surveillance of the American and world population, later exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden.

When Clapper formally resigned in 2017, he almost immediately travelled to Australia, where he helped to establish a powerful Office of National Intelligence, modelled on his previous office in the American state apparatus.

The DSR called for an expansion of naval strike capabilities, but raised the need for a further review into the sector. It will be conducted by retired US Navy Vice-Admiral William Hilarides, who, as per the *Australian*, will be tasked with “determin[ing] the future size and structure of the Royal Australian Navy.”

This underscores the fact that the Australian state is already completely integrated into the US war machine. The two are “interoperable,” to use the jargon favored by the national-security establishment.

The fight against the militarisation in Australia is thus a component of the struggle against the US-led plans for war against Russia and China. This can only be waged on the basis of an internationalist perspective, whose aim is to unite workers around the world, in a common struggle against all of the governments.

Such an anti-war movement must be based on a socialist program, because as in the 20th century, the danger of a catastrophic world war flows from the breakdown of the capitalist system, and the ensuing frenzied pursuit of profits, resources and markets by the major powers.



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