

US to establish military command centre in northern Australia

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed on Friday that the American military has advanced plans to establish a command centre in the northern Australian city of Darwin. The information, though scanty, indicates that the facility will function as a hub for aggressive military operations throughout the region, directed against China, with a central focus on the deployment of the most potent strike assets of the US Air Force.

The development of the “Squadron Operations Facility” was not announced by the Australian Labor government, or even discussed in the parliament. Instead, the ABC discovered the plans in US budget filings and procurement documents. That is, without even the semblance of a democratic mandate or of the public being informed, the US administration is proceeding to establish the facility.

The ABC reported that according to tender documents, the facility “will be used for maintenance, mission planning, intelligence and crew briefings—it is budgeted to cost \$US26 million (\$40 million).” Those extremely broad descriptions cover almost the entire gamut of potential military activity, up to and including the launching of armed operations against other states.

The establishment of the centre is taking place in the context of a massive militarisation of northern Australia. That itself is part of a broader US strategy of diversifying the stationing of its military infrastructure throughout the Indo-Pacific. Assets that had previously been based at the US military facility on Guam, for instance, are being moved elsewhere, including to Australia. The rationale, spelt out by think-tanks close to the US government, is that they will be further from the Chinese mainland and thus out of the range of some of its missile systems.

In 2011, the Gillard Labor government signed up to the “pivot to Asia,” including a vast military build-up in preparation for war against China, which is viewed as the

chief threat to US imperialist hegemony. At that stage, the centrepiece was the establishment of a US Marine base in Darwin, through which up to 2,500 US Marines now “rotate” each year.

Darwin, thus already with a substantial US military presence, is being transformed into something of a garrison city, to serve as a launching pad for American operations across the Indo-Pacific. According to the ABC, the US has earmarked \$630 million in military spending in northern Australia for the next two to three years.

That will include \$258 million to build a “parking apron” at the RAAF Darwin airbase to facilitate the takeoff and landing of US warplanes. Similar upgrades are already underway at the RAAF Tindal base, south of Darwin, which will also host a maintenance facility for B-52s. Previous tender documents have disclosed \$270 million to build 11 huge jet fuel storage tanks around Darwin.

The context is the decision by the Labor government to allow the US to “rotate”—that is, base—six of its nuclear-capable B-52 bombers in the Northern Territory. Because the US policy is never to confirm or deny whether its nuclear-capable assets are carrying such weapons, Labor’s decision effectively overturns Australia’s nuclear-weapons free status.

As with the revelations about the command centre, the information about the B-52s was discovered through US budgetary and tender documents last year. No government minister has spoken substantively on the momentous decision to station the nuclear-capable bombers in Australia.

According to the ABC, the latest US tender documents declared: “The [squadron operations] facility is required to support strategic operations and to run multiple 15-day training exercises during the NT dry season for deployed B-52 squadrons.”

For the past decade, Pentagon documents have sketched

out an “AirSea Battle” strategy for war with China. In the physical terrain of the Indo-Pacific, maritime warfare would be central to such a conflict, as would the operations of warplanes and missiles. In such planning scenarios, Australia has been nominated as the “southern anchor.” It would serve as a hub for US and allied military infrastructure and weapons, and as a base from which operations could be launched.

The Labor government is fully committed to this policy. Its Defence Strategic Review earlier this year outlined the largest build-up of the Australian military in 80 years, centred on the acquisition of strike capabilities, especially missiles, across all branches of the armed forces to enable “impactful projection” throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Labor has also undertaken to dramatically expand basing for the US military. At an Australia-US Ministerial Consultation (AUSMIN) meeting in Washington last October, Labor ministers gave open-ended undertakings for US basing in the country across air, land and sea.

Those commitments were reiterated at the latest AUSMIN meeting in Brisbane at the end of last month. The AUSMIN statement “recalled the Force Posture Agreement, which recognises the mutual benefits to Australia and the United States from access to facilities and areas in Australia by the United States Armed Forces and that such access and use is on a rotational basis...”

Such rotations would be expanded through US Maritime Navy Patrols operating out of Australia, as well as maritime spy planes and through frequent visits by nuclear-powered submarines to Australian ports. The AUSMIN talks unveiled a US commitment to invest in Australian missile manufacturing. Australia will serve as a hub and stockpiler of missiles for the US military. It also revealed the existence of a secret agreement for collaboration on space warfare.

Just a week after the AUSMIN talks, the USS North Carolina, one of America’s Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines, docked at the HMAS Stirling naval base in Perth, Western Australia. It is the first visit by one of the vessels since the Labor government announced a \$368 billion deal in March for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US and Britain.

The submarine project, the centrepiece of AUKUS, the militarist pact between the three countries, has several phases. Long before Australia receives any nuclear-powered submarines, it is to become a de facto base for existing US and British submarines.

A Nine Media report on the docking was particularly

blunt as to the purpose. It was “part of plans to bolster the Indo Pacific against any Chinese naval threat.” HMAS Stirling is to be upgraded, “as thousands more submariners file through Perth” in Western Australia. Under AUKUS the Labor government is also planning to develop an east coast submarine base.

The Nine Media report included an extraordinary declaration: “The public is not allowed to know how long the North Carolina will be docked in Perth—that information is classified even from Australia’s defence minister.”

More and more, the US and Australian militaries are being integrated all down the line. AUSMIN also unveiled the establishment of a Combined Intelligence Centre in Australia. Under it, US intelligence operatives from the Defence Intelligence Agency will be integrated into the Australian intelligence apparatus, particularly the Australian Defence Intelligence Organisation.

That underscores the extent to which Australia will be automatically involved in all US military operations, including wars, in the Indo-Pacific. The US spying and war planning facility of Pine Gap in Central Australia already plays a central role in American surveillance and military operations throughout the region. The most advanced US strike assets are being deployed to Australia and the military and intelligence operations of the two countries are being completely interwoven through the development of joint command centres.

The transformation of Australia into a frontline state in the preparations for war with China demonstrates the urgency of workers and young people joining the fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, directed against the source of war, the capitalist system itself. Such a struggle involves a political fight against the Labor government and all of its defenders.



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