

US and Australia prepare military build up in Indian Ocean

By Patrick O'Connor
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The *Washington Post* reported Tuesday that the Obama administration and the Australian Labor government have advanced plans for a substantial military buildup in the Indian Ocean. An increased US naval presence, including aircraft carriers and attack submarines, is being prepared for Western Australia's Stirling naval base, and American manned surveillance aircraft and remote-operated drones will be stationed in the Cocos Islands.

These moves follow the announcement last November, during President Barack Obama's visit to Australia, that 2,500 Marines will be stationed in northern Australia on a rotating basis. The first contingent is due to arrive in the next fortnight. The Marine deployment marked only the first stage in a far-reaching US-Australian military realignment that is centrally directed against China.

Since being installed in office in June 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard has committed Australian military forces to Washington's provocative "pivot" to East Asia. Bolstering its strategic presence in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, the US is attempting to maintain its dominance by using its military forces to help contain China's growing influence. The South China Sea and the neighbouring straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok are central to this strategy. These vital trade routes connecting China to the Middle East, Europe and Africa represent potential "choke points" that could be used to prevent the import of essential oil and other supplies.

"In terms of your overall influence in the Asia-Pacific zone, the strategic weight is shifting south," an unnamed senior Australian official told the *Washington Post*. "Australia didn't look all that important during the Cold War. But Australia looks much more important if your fascination is really with

the Southeast Asian archipelago."

The *Washington Post* explained that Pentagon officials were interested in establishing a presence at Stirling naval base "because it could give the Navy a sorely needed place to refuel, re-equip and repair ships on the Indian Ocean." An unnamed senior US defence official explained: "Australia is the only ally that we have on the Indian Ocean. We see the Indian Ocean as an area that we need to spend a little more time on, where we have fewer well developed relations with countries, compared to the western Pacific."

The Cocos Islands, populated by just 600 people, is an isolated territory of atolls and coral islands in the Indian Ocean, lying closer to Indonesia than to the Australian mainland. Previously part of the British Empire and run as a private family fiefdom for many decades, sovereignty was transferred to Australia in 1955.

Now, in the context of the US drive for war against China, the territory has taken on a new significance. A possible American presence was raised in official discussions during Obama's visit to Australia last year, and the development of more advanced Australian military infrastructure on the islands was proposed in an interim military posture review released last month.

Washington's only military base in the Indian Ocean is on the British island territory of Diego Garcia, but the *Washington Post* explained that there "operations are crowded, with little room to expand, [and] the base's future is uncertain; the US lease will expire in 2016." The newspaper continued: "Aircraft based in the Cocos would be well-positioned to launch spy flights over the South China Sea."

These aircraft will reportedly include unarmed, high-altitude drones. No mention has been made in the media coverage about the prospect of armed drones

being stationed in the Cocos Islands, but this is likely to follow. The Obama administration has vastly expanded the use of attack drones in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other countries, carrying out illegal assassinations. The Pentagon has no doubt also calculated their potential use in East Asia.

None of the various initiatives heightening the US military presence in Australia was raised by the Labor Party before the last federal election in 2010. Yet the Gillard government's complicity with Washington's reckless confrontation of China now exposes the Australian population to enormous dangers in the event of war between the two nuclear armed powers.

Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith have confirmed the *Washington Post* story, while attempting to downplay its significance. Smith declared a new shared military facility on the Cocos Islands was a "long-term prospect," requiring infrastructure upgrades to the airfield and other facilities. He denied that the US or Australia was advancing a containment strategy against China.

Gillard, speaking in South Korea during the nuclear security summit, similarly insisted: "China knows we are in a long term defence arrangement with America, and I think we can, whilst continuing to be a staunch ally of America, also have a good, constructive, robust relationship with China, including an economic relationship of considerable breadth and depth."

Everyone in Australian media and foreign policy circles understands that the government's statements on China are merely for public consumption and that the Asian power is the central target of the US-Australian military build up.

"For decades, Australia has been unique among America's close allies because we did not host US military bases," Hugh White, analyst at the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, explained today. "And that was only because the US didn't want them. So the big question is, what has changed to make the US now so interested in military facilities here, when for decades they haven't been interested at all? It's about China. That is the big thing that's changed. It is about building America's military position in Asia to resist China's growing challenge to American primacy in Asia."

White, a prominent critic of the Gillard government's foreign policy orientation, warned: "For Australia,

escalating strategic rivalry between the US and China would be a disaster, whatever happened. Yet we are encouraging Washington by agreeing to expand military co-operation to support its containment of Beijing."

An article in the *Australian* today detailed some aspects of the divisions wracking the foreign policy and military establishment in Canberra, as concerns escalate about the implications of participating in a military drive against Australia's most important economic partner. "Insiders warn that the same rough divisions that derailed the previous white paper process [in 2009], a clash between so-called China hawks and China doves, are still prevalent in Canberra, although the disclosures about US forces this week suggest that the hawks still hold the upper hand," the article noted. "Unless reconciled, these divisions pose a threat to Australia's ability to adopt a clear-eyed and unified strategic response to the rise of China."

The Chinese government is yet to officially react to the latest revelations of the US-Australia military moves. Jia Qingguo, an advisor to the government, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program, "Some people [in Beijing] are bound to be worried, especially people who are, you know, in charge of China's defence. If the missions are, hypothetically, are targeted against China, then China has a reason to be worried."

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