

Australia's "border protection" not just about refugees

By Peter Symonds
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The undetected arrival of a boat carrying 66 Sri Lankan asylum seekers at the regional Western Australian port of Geraldton on Tuesday has triggered calls by opposition parties for stronger "border protection." While nominally targeted against refugees, their proposals point to the unstated purpose of the Australian military build-up in waters off the continent's north-western coast—to monitor key shipping lanes through South East Asia as part of the US preparations for war against China.

The reaction was out of all proportion to the supposed "threat" posed by the arrival of a small and obviously unarmed fishing boat. Colin Barrett, the Western Australian state premier, described the refugee boat arrival as "a serious and unacceptable breach of border security" and called for a navy patrol boat to be based at Geraldton. Federal opposition leader Tony Abbott declared that if it won the September election, the Liberal-National Coalition would purchase "unmanned aerial vehicles [drones] to ensure we've got proper surveillance over the approaches to Australia."

Right-wing demagogue and independent MP, Bob Katter, went one step further. After declaring that the navy did not have the capacity to monitor Australian coastlines, he proposed: "We need 100 patrol boats, a bit bigger than the conventional patrol boats,... built to take six cruise missiles and have interception capacity. The missiles would purely be for defensive purposes."

Criticising Katter's comments, Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young declared that the debate about asylum seekers was "out of control." She added: "Using the rhetoric of war against refugees is hysterical. Bob Katter's plan for 100 missile-laden patrol boats cruising around our borders warding off leaky refugee boats is absolute insanity."

The Greens, however, completely accept the framework of "border protection" and restrictive immigration. Hanson-Young objection to the "rhetoric of war" only covers up the underlying military purposes of operations against "boat people". The Greens have propped up the minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, even as it has reinforced the military presence in northern Australia, signed on to Obama's aggressive "pivot" against China and opened Australian military bases to the US armed forces.

While Hanson-Young brands Katter's proposal as "absolute insanity," the same could be said of the entire Border Protection Command apparatus that was ramped up under the previous Howard Liberal government and extended by the Labor government from 2007. Large amounts of money and military resources are devoted each year to preventing several thousand people exercising their legitimate right under international law to claim refugee status. If the coalition wins the September election, it plans to spend another \$1.5 billion on long-distance US-supplied drones that can operate at great distances from the Australian coast.

The obvious question is why?

In part, it serves domestic political purposes. Over the past decade, both Labor and the Coalition have engaged in a filthy xenophobic campaign to demonise refugees, making them the scapegoats for the destruction of jobs and essential services that have resulted from the policies of their governments. The assault on the basic rights of those fleeing persecution and economic hardship is also being used to justify inroads into the legal and democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

However, the incessant vilification of "boat people"

also helps to disguise an extensive naval and aerial surveillance operation that monitors, not simply refugee boats, but shipping movements through some of world's most sensitive, strategic waterways. The Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits in South East Asia link the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. They are vital to China, which is heavily dependent on the import of energy and minerals from Africa and the Middle East.

US military strategists have long regarded these three straits as vital "choke points" that could be used to enforce an economic blockade of China. More than 80 percent of China's oil and gas imports pass through the Malacca Strait. The Obama administration's confrontational strategy against China has focussed on aggressively building up military ties throughout the region, including with Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, in order to ensure US naval control over these shipping lanes.

Australia's "border protection" operations dovetail with this US strategy. Australia has no separate coast guard. The navy has command over Operation Resolute, which began in 2006 and includes airforce, federal police and customs personnel. The maritime zones around continental Australia and associated islands are huge—encompassing some 10 percent of the earth's oceans. The waters around Australia's Cocos and Christmas islands, off the north-west coast, extend well into the Indian Ocean and toward the key straits through Indonesia.

The Border Protection Command draws on naval and air force surveillance aircraft and contracted civilian aircraft, as well as naval warships and patrol boats. All the data is integrated into its computerised Australian Maritime Identification System, which combines it with shipping information from other government agencies and classified defence intelligence to produce "threat assessments." No doubt, the information is made available to the Pentagon and US spy agencies under intelligence-sharing arrangements.

The integration of Australian and US military operations has only become more intimate since the Gillard government agreed, in November 2011, to the stationing of American Marines in Darwin—the main operational base for the Border Protection Command—and the opening up of Australian military bases to the US navy and air forces. These plans

include the possible establishment of a forward base for US military drones on the Cocos Islands and the stationing of an entire aircraft carrier battle group near the West Australian capital of Perth.

The stated brief for Operation Resolute includes everything from blocking "irregular maritime arrivals" and "illegal fishing" to protection against "maritime terrorism" and "piracy, robbery and violence at sea." No mention is made of its unstated strategic purpose, as that would trigger opposition from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, as well as from workers and youth in Australia, who behind their backs, have been placed on the frontline of a potential war between the US and China.

Amid the media furore surrounding the Geraldton incident, the government announced an internal inquiry into the undetected boat arrival, which will only be used to further bolster the Border Protection Command. The government has already made clear that surveillance resources will not be diverted to Geraldton, which is well to the south of the shipping lanes that the military apparatus is tasked with monitoring.

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