

Australia: Socialist Alternative and the US “pivot to Asia”

By Oscar Grenfell
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The Australian pseudo-left organisation, Socialist Alternative has broken its longstanding silence on the growth of military tensions throughout the Asia-Pacific region, publishing two articles on the Australian Defence White Paper, which was released last month. Since the Obama administration announced its “pivot to Asia” in 2011 the organisation has largely adhered to the official media blackout of the massive US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific.

To the extent that Socialist Alternative has written on the “pivot” it has been to deny the dangers of a new global conflagration, obscure Australia’s central role in the aggressive US drive to war against China and echo the claims that China is a new “expansionist” power responsible for disrupting the status quo.

Their latest articles are no exception. They correspond to a shift of tack in the corporate press, which has begun affording the “pivot” limited coverage.

The major dailies of the corporate and financial elite, including the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Australian*, have publicised mounting calls from sections of the US and Australian political establishments for Canberra to carry out its own provocative incursions into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea, under the bogus guise of “defending freedom of navigation.” Such a move would threaten open military conflict.

In the midst of these demands, the Turnbull Liberal-National Coalition government released its 2016 Defence White Paper, outlining projected spending of \$195 billion on military acquisitions alone.

In response, an article on the *World Socialist Web Site* warned:

“The ‘Defence White Paper,’ published by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s Coalition government on February 25, amounts to a declaration that Australian imperialism, in alliance with the United States, is preparing for war against China. The document incorporates all the military commitments made by the former Labor Party government to the anti-China US ‘pivot to Asia’ in November 2011, as well as additional undertakings made to Washington by the Coalition under former Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Hundreds of billions of dollars will be spent over the coming years on the

greatest expansion of the Australian armed forces since World War II.”

Socialist Alternative’s response was aimed at obscuring the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and the *World Socialist Web Site*, and chloroforming workers and young people as to the immense danger of war.

A short article by Tom Bramble, one of the organisations leading “theoreticians,” on February 29 focused almost exclusively on the financial outlay outlined by the White Paper. It declared that this was “theft from the people on a grand scale.” The attempt to present the massive military expenditure as a primarily national, budgetary question dovetailed with the position of the Greens, who have been fulsome supporters of Australia’s integration into the “pivot,” but criticised the White Paper on the grounds that excessive military spending would interfere with the demands of the corporate elite for a budget surplus.

A lengthier article by Bramble on March 18, which described the White Paper as “Australia’s manifesto for militarism” took a different tack. At the outset, it declared: “With an arms race in Asia in full swing, the Australian government is determined not to be left behind.” However the question of who was responsible for this state of affairs was left deliberately opaque, with the implication being that Australia’s participation in the escalating military tensions in the region was a largely defensive response to the actions of other powers.

The significance of this position was revealed later in the article, with Bramble declaring that “The problem for the US and Australian governments is that this ‘stability’ [i.e., the continuation of US military domination] has been threatened in recent years by two developments.”

The first, he declared, was, “the increasing tendency of regional powers, particularly in the Middle East and south-west Asia, to push for their own spheres of influence. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel have been increasingly willing to act independently of the US, creating havoc in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Palestine.”

In other words, the deepening quagmire in the Middle East is not the responsibility of the United States and its imperialist partners, including Australia, which have carried out over a decade of continuous, predatory wars aimed at securing

resources, dominating the geo-strategically critical region and establishing neo-colonial rule. Rather, an amalgam of “regional powers,” comprised of client states of the US (Saudi Arabia, and Israel), and those in Washington’s crosshairs (Iran) are primarily to blame.

Bramble’s position is in line with Socialist Alternative’s vociferous support for the US-led regime change operations in Libya and Syria, which it has presented as “democratic revolutions” that should be supported. To promote this pro-imperialist line, Socialist Alternative, like its co-thinkers internationally, has denied the widely-documented sponsorship of the so-called “rebels,” first in Libya, and now in Syria, by the United States and the other major imperialist powers, along with the fact that these “rebels” consist primarily of hard-line Islamist organisations with ties to Al Qaeda.

In August 2012, Socialist Alternative denounced “knee-jerk anti-imperialism” and declared that, “Imperialism, in the sense of Western neo-colonialism, is not the main threat facing the masses of Syria, or of the Arab world as a whole.”

As to the second development threatening “stability” in the Asia-Pacific region, Bramble continued: “more significantly, the US is threatened by the rise of China and, to a lesser extent, Russia as rival imperialist powers.” He commented: “China has become increasingly assertive, disturbing US domination.”

This line, which dovetails with denunciations of Russian and Chinese “expansionism” emanating from the strategists of US, European and Australian imperialism, has been outlined in a series of commentaries by Socialist Alternative on Ukraine and Syria. The organisation supported the US-backed neo-fascist-led coup against the Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovich, which marked an escalation in a decade-long US/NATO military encirclement of Russia.

More recently, Socialist Alternative has fulminated against Russia’s support for the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, denounced the Obama administration for “appeasing” the Putin regime and hailed the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey near the border with Syria last year—a US-backed provocation intended as a signal of Washington’s willingness to militarily confront Russia.

The claim that the military tensions in Asia are a product of China’s “increasingly assertive” line is no less false. In reality, the US is preparing to deploy 60 percent of its navy and air force in the region by 2020, establishing aggressive military relations with states throughout the region and stoking tensions on the Korean peninsula, as well as in the South and East China Seas.

In 2013, the US International Socialist Organization (ISO), which has close ties to Socialist Alternative, spelt out the political implications of Bramble’s position, declaring that Australia, Japan and other states in Asia were “Lilliputians,” supporting the US military build-up in the region to “build a counterhegemonic alliance against the Chinese Gulliver.” It absurdly declared that they had “appealed to their historic ally,

the United States, to intercede on their behalf.”

Though Bramble may be less explicit, his position is essentially no different. This is why Socialist Alternative has never indicted the successive Labor and Liberal governments of Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott and now Malcolm Turnbull for placing the Australian population on the frontlines of war. Nor have they ever so much as mentioned the direct hand of Washington in the overnight political coup against Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in July 2010, over his calls for the US to make limited accommodations to China in the Asia-Pacific to prevent all-out conflict. Likewise, they have remained silent on the role of the Greens, who propped up the minority Gillard Labor government that was installed after the coup, that immediately pledged Australia’s unconditional support for US militarism in every corner of the globe and that signed on to the “pivot” in 2011.

Socialist Alternative, like all the pseudo-left organisations, is a nationalist outfit, articulating the interests of sections of the upper middle-class increasingly integrated into the framework of capitalist politics. It has close relations with, and advocates unconditional support for, the unions as they collaborate daily with governments and the employers against the working class, spouting nationalist demagoguery against foreign workers aimed at dividing the working class along national lines. Significantly, Socialist Alternative published apologies for the xenophobic and nationalist campaign waged by the major trade unions against the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement last year.

Above all, Bramble and Socialist Alternative are seeking to prevent workers and young people from understanding that the mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific and the violent explosion of American militarism are the sharpest expressions of the breakdown of the global capitalist system which poses, no less sharply than in the first decades of the twentieth century, the alternatives of world war and socialist revolution.

That is why they make no reference to the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—above all between the globally-integrated nature of the economy, and the division of the world into antagonistic nation-states—which are propelling all of the major powers to adopt policies that are leading inexorably towards a new global conflagration.

Exposing the anti-Marxist, pro-imperialist politics of Socialist Alternative and the pseudo-left is a critical component of the fight to develop an international anti-war movement of the working class of all countries, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, to halt the descent into such a catastrophe.

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