

Trump nominates anti-China hawk as US ambassador to Australia

By James Cogan
14 February 2018

President Donald Trump last week nominated Admiral Harry Harris, the current commander of US Pacific Command (PACOM), to fill the vacant post of American ambassador to Australia.

The Trump administration has selected a figure who has the closest relations with the highest echelons of the Australian armed forces, intelligence agencies and political and media establishment. The appointment ensures Washington will be represented in Canberra by an ardent advocate of a confrontational militarist stance by the US and its allies against China and, in the short-term, of waging war with North Korea unless it ends its nuclear and missile programs.

Harris was nominated following the publication of the new National Defense Strategy, which named China and Russia as the greatest threat to the US and vowed to “prioritise preparedness for war” against them. As the Trump administration escalates its “strategic competition” with China, it will expect and, through Harris, will insist upon, the unconditional political and military support of Australian imperialism.

Harris was born in Japan in 1956. His father was an American naval officer and World War II veteran. His mother was a Japanese national. He graduated as a naval flight officer in 1978 and steadily rose through the ranks of the Navy, holding an operational combat command during the 2003 war against Iraq.

From March 2006 to mid-June 2007, he commanded Joint Task Force Guantanamo, presiding over the barbaric detention and denial of due process to hundreds of people branded by the US military as “enemy combatants” and “terrorists.”

From November 2009, Harris was the commander of the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. In March 2011, he was centrally involved in planning the murderous US and NATO bombardment of Libya.

In October 2011, he was appointed assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, serving as his direct representative to Hillary Clinton, the Obama

administration’s secretary of state. The following month, President Barack Obama formally announced the military and strategic “pivot to Asia” on the floor of the Australian parliament.

Harris’s relations with the Australian military would have developed exponentially from that time, as its naval, air and ground forces stepped up training to be fully “interoperable” with their American counterparts. US Marines began a “rotation” of six months a year in Darwin, northern Australia, and US aircraft and ships increased visits to Australian bases.

Harris was promoted to command of the US Pacific Fleet in October 2013. In May 2015, he took over as commander of PACOM as a whole, placing him in charge of five aircraft carrier battlegroups, tens of thousands of marines, over 110,000 Army personnel, and hundreds of Air Force bombers and fighters.

The admiral has wholeheartedly backed the US intervention in maritime disputes between China and neighbouring countries over the South China Sea and the US stoking of tensions with North Korea. In his first speech as PACOM commander, he asserted: “There’s no shortage of challenges that confront us. From North Korea with its quest for nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them intercontinentally, to China’s preposterous claims to, and land reclamation activities, in the South China Sea.”

From October 2015, Harris ordered periodic “freedom of navigation” provocations by US warships into waters claimed by China, raising tensions dramatically. He has also advocated more frequent incursions.

Harris’s militarist outlook was expressed in an address on June 29, 2017 to US and Australia military commanders. “If we have to fight tonight, I don’t want it to be a fair fight. If it’s a knife fight, I want to bring a gun. If it’s a gun fight, I want to bring in the MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) and the artillery of our friends, partners and allies—allies especially like Australia,” he declared.

“I want you to remember the importance of the Australia-US alliance. Remember that our alliance was

forged in battle more than a century ago... the Australia-US alliance matters more today than ever before. It matters to our two great nations, it matters to the Indo-Asia-Pacific, and it matters to the world. No-one should doubt the staying power of this alliance.”

Harris’s nomination as ambassador is a gauge of just how vital the US views its alliance with Australia at this historical juncture.

Economically, Australia is one of the world’s largest producers of natural gas, iron ore, coal, uranium, bauxite, alumina, zinc, nickel and other metals. US-based banks and corporations have an accumulated stock of investment in the country of over \$860 billion and dominate much of its economy.

Strategically, the continent occupies a pivotal position, close to the crucial sea lanes that pass between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Australia hosts Pine Gap, an American satellite and communication base that is crucial for the targeting of air strikes, cruise missiles and nuclear weapons. Northern Australian airfields can be used by long-range B-2, B-1 and B-52 bombers to launch operations as far as China. Its naval bases are frequently visited by US warships and submarines for resupply, maintenance and rest. Discussions have taken place on permanently basing an aircraft carrier battlegroup and nuclear submarines in Australian ports.

As Harris’s comments indicate, the American military takes for granted access to Australian bases and material support, and Australian military involvement in any US war in the Asia-Pacific. While small, the Australian armed forces are technically advanced and trained to integrate into larger American formations. Throughout the 16-year “war on terror,” the Australian Air Force, Navy and Army special forces have been “blooded” in combat operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

The American ruling class, however, has reasons to be concerned about whether it can rely upon its Australian ally as Washington pursues “strategic competition” with China.

Firstly, China is Australia’s largest trading partner. Significant sections of Australian big business—in mining, agribusiness, education services and tourism—are terrified that Canberra’s alignment with Washington could affect their access to Chinese markets. Such interests are reflected in calls by figures such as former prime ministers Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd for Australia to distance itself from the US or adopt an “independent” foreign policy.

Secondly, and of greater concern to Washington, there is no constituency for war in the working class in Australia. In 2002 and 2003, mass opposition emerged, as part of an international movement, against the Iraq war. As the danger of a catastrophic conflict with China seeps into mass consciousness, a movement inevitably will emerge against

the support of the dominant factions of the Australian capitalist class for the US alliance and American militarism.

Harris’s role as ambassador over the next two years is to stiffen the backbone of the Australian establishment to silence dissent within the ruling class itself, and to repress opposition from the working class.

The installation of such a high-ranking official as US ambassador to Australia can be compared only with the 1973 appointment of Marshall Green, a veteran of the CIA-instigated military coups in South Korea and Indonesia. Under conditions of immense political turmoil and deep opposition to the US alliance due to the crimes of the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration sent Green to uphold American imperialist interests in Australia.

Green played a central role in the intrigues that culminated in the November 11, 1975 “Canberra Coup,” in which the head of state sacked the Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam after it began to lose control over the industrial and social movement in the working class. The Australian military was placed on high alert but not deployed into the streets. The pro-US trade unions and Whitlam himself still had sufficient political authority to insist that workers accept the coup, demobilise opposition and channel it into the dead-end of new parliamentary elections.

Four decades later, Washington has not sent a behind-the-scenes conspirator like Green to its Canberra embassy. Instead, it has sent a veteran military commander who has taken part in the destruction of Iraq and Libya, presided over illegal detentions and torture and believes the American corporate oligarchy’s interests can be defended only by unleashing overwhelming violence against rivals such as China.

The working class must take Harris’s appointment as a warning: US imperialism will use every means to ensure Australia remains in the American “camp” and to assist the Australian ruling class suppress opposition to war and social inequality.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>