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U.S. General Reveals Plans for Air Force Expansion in Asia

By Peter Symonds

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American officials routinely deny that Obama’s “pivot to Asia” is aimed at preparing for war against China. However, in comments this week reported on the *Foreign Policy* web site, General Herbert Carlisle, chief of US Air Force operations in the Pacific, outlined a far-reaching build-up of American war planes and personnel throughout Asia.

The four-star general told reporters in Washington on July 29 that the US Air Force would dispatch “fighters, tankers, and at some point in the future, maybe bombers on a rotational basis” to bases in northern Australia. He indicated that the “rotations” would begin next year to Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Darwin before moving to RAAF Base Tindal, several hundred kilometres south.

The US Air Force has already flown training missions into RAAF Base Darwin, with a B-52 arriving from Guam last August. Longer stays are now being prepared, in line with the US Marine “rotational presence” in Darwin that will reach 1,150 next year. By 2016, a fully-equipped 2,500-strong Marine Air Ground Task Force will operate from Darwin on six-month rotations.

According to the *Navy Times* on July 31, US warships and sailors will also be using Darwin more frequently as part of Marine training exercises. Over recent weeks, US naval warships, including the George Washington aircraft carrier strike group, have been taking part in the largest ever joint US-Australian Talisman Sabre war games in the eastern state of Queensland. [link to article]

Foreign Policy reported: “This is just the start of the Air Force’s plan to expand its presence in Asia, according to Carlisle. In addition to the Australian deployments, the Air Force will be sending jets to Changi East air base in Singapore, Korat air base in Thailand, a site in India, and possibly bases at Kubi Point and Puerto Princesa in the Philippines and airfields in Indonesia and Malaysia.”

The US military already has large permanent bases close to China—in Japan, South Korea and Guam. The plans outlined by Carlisle involve a major expansion of the US Air Force into countries in South East Asia, where it has had little or no presence since the end of the Vietnam War. In the case of India, the US military has not previously had access to its military bases.

Foreign Policy noted that the US Marines were “also refurbishing old World War II airfields on Pacific Islands. These bare-bones strips, like the one on Tinian, would be used by American forces in case their main bases are targeted by Chinese ballistic missiles.” The Tinian base in the North Marianas is being built nominally as a live firing range and training area. During World War II, the US Air Force used the Tinian, Guam and Saipan bases for devastating air raids on the Japanese mainland.

In a particularly revealing remark, Carlisle likened the US Air Force build up in Asia to the Cold War in Europe. “Back in the late great days of the Cold War,” he said, “we had a thing called Checkered Flag: We rotated almost every CONUS [Continental United States] unit to Europe. Every two years, every unit would go and work out of a collateral operating base in Europe. We’re turning to that in the Pacific.”

Carlisle did not explicitly name the “enemy” of the new Cold War-style deployment, but he accused China of “aggressive, assertive behaviour”. In fact, Obama’s “pivot” has encouraged key Asian allies such as Japan and the Philippines to more forcefully pursue their maritime disputes with China, leading to a rapid rise in regional tensions, which the US has in turn exploited to justify its expanded military presence.

The general declared that the Air Force would rotate its “most capable platforms” into the Pacific, including F-22 Raptors, F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and B-2 stealth bombers. He pointed out that the first permanent overseas base for the F-35 would be in Asia.

Carlisle’s remarks are in line with US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel’s announcement in December that 60 percent of the US Air Force overseas-based war planes and personnel would be stationed in the Indo-Pacific region by 2020. His predecessor, Leon Panetta, had already announced the “rebalancing” of 60 percent of US naval assets to the region over the same period.

Speaking in Singapore last Saturday, US Vice President Joe Biden reiterated Washington’s determination to remain the dominant power in South East Asia. “I state without apology that we are a Pacific power. America is a Pacific resident power and we will remain so,” he said. Biden was addressing sailors on the US Navy’s littoral combat ship USS Freedom, which is based in Singapore.

There is no explanation for the massive US military build-up underway throughout the Indo-Pacific region other than the preparations for war against China. Biden declared in Singapore that “our mere presence” was “the basis upon which stability in the region is built”. The opposite is true. Obama’s “pivot” over the past four years has profoundly destabilised the region, raising tensions and dangerously inflaming flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula.

The Obama administration is engaged in an offensive against potential rival China on all fronts—diplomatic, economic and strategic—in a bid to maintain US regional and global dominance. The Pentagon has drawn up detailed war plans, known as AirSea Battle, that would involve a massive missile and air assault on China’s missile sites, military bases and command centres. This strategy is complemented by plans for an economic blockade of China by severing its shipping routes through South East Asia, on which it depends for imports of energy and minerals from Africa and the Middle East.

The build-up of American air force and naval assets, the restructuring of existing US bases in North East Asia and the establishment of new basing arrangements with Australia and throughout South East Asia are all part of these preparations.