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US war drive in Asia continues apace

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Such is the fraught state of geo-political relations throughout the globe that every major international meeting, forum or summit becomes an arena for new provocations, intrigues and the preparations for war. The travels of US Secretary of State John Kerry and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel in Asia over the past week are a case in point.

Both officials were in Sydney on Tuesday for the annual AUSMIN dialogue with their Australian counterparts. The meeting centred on the signing of a military pact that consolidates Australia as a base for US Marines, warships and aircraft aimed against China. But the two allies also used the opportunity to issue fresh threats against Russia, declare their commitment to the renewed US air war in Iraq and shed a few crocodile tears over the Gaza Strip, while continuing to back Israel to the hilt.

The Australian Coalition government has played a particularly provocative role in stoking tensions with Russia over Ukraine, blaming Moscow for the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and pushing a UN resolution to place international investigators at the crash site. Kerry used the platform in Sydney to reiterate unsubstantiated claims that Russia was responsible for shooting down MH17 and warn that Russian President Vladimir Putin could be barred from a G20 summit in Australia later this year.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop was even more confrontational. As the danger of open conflict between Russia and Ukraine over a Russian aid convoy loomed, Bishop declared that “Australia would condemn in the strongest possible terms any effort by Russia to enter Ukraine under the guise of some kind of humanitarian mission.” She had already warned last week that Canberra could ban the sale of uranium ore to Russia, declaring that “everything is on the table.”

The hypocrisy is staggering, given Canberra’s full backing for the Obama administration’s “humanitarian” mission in Iraq to justify the return of US war planes to Iraqi skies.

The fact that Canberra is functioning as Washington’s agent provocateur on the other side of the globe is not an aberration or just a response to the MH17’s downing. It flows from Australia’s close integration into US imperialism’s global war plans.

The US-led confrontation with Russia over Ukraine is of a piece with its “pivot to Asia” and the military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region against China. Amid the worsening global economic crisis, Washington has shifted its strategic focus to Eurasia. Driven by its relative historic decline, US imperialism is pursuing its long-held ambition to dominate this vast landmass and its huge reserves of cheap labour and raw materials.

Even as the prospect of war in Europe and the Middle East looms, the Obama administration is building a network of military alliances in Asia aimed at Beijing, seeking to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours, and paint the Chinese regime as “expansionist.” Before their arrival in Australia, Kerry and Hagel visited New Delhi to consolidate the US-Indian strategic partnership with the new right-wing Indian government. Significantly, Hagel offered closer collaboration in developing military technologies, which is not only a boon to US manufacturers, but is aimed at weaning India from its traditional dependence on Russian weapons.

Kerry also participated last weekend in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Burma, where he confronted China with the demand for a “freeze” on its supposedly provocative activities in the South China Sea. Far from seeking to ease tensions, Kerry’s aim was to set a new benchmark for branding Beijing’s actions as aggressive and illegal. Over the past four years, the Obama administration has transformed relatively minor territorial disputes in the South China Sea into dangerous flashpoints for war by encouraging the Philippines and Vietnam, in particular, to stridently press their claims against China.

Along with India and Japan, Australia is one of the key linchpins in the US “pivot.” The US-Australia Force Posture Agreement signed this week is the consolidation of agreements reached with the previous Labor government in 2011 to station US Marines in northern Australia. The document sets the legal and financial framework for basing an entire Marine Air/Ground Task Force in Darwin, as well as “enhanced aircraft cooperation” and “naval cooperation” in the north and west of Australia.

Behind the backs of the Australian and American working class, the US is transforming the Australian continent into a huge base for US military operations against China—particularly in the South China Sea and the strategic naval chokepoints through the Indonesian archipelago, such as the Malacca Strait. The detailed commitments contained in the Force Posture Agreement

and the US-India Defence Framework Agreement are closely guarded secrets. Like the secret protocols and treaties that set the stage for World War I, the present military plans and preparations are being kept from the working people, who are overwhelmingly opposed to war.

In comments on the Australian ABC-TV's "7.30" program, Defence Secretary Hagel emphatically rejected the suggestion that the US was pulling back from any part of the world. "You take Asia Pacific; we're doing more in the Asia Pacific, with more ships, more people, more initiatives than we've ever done. We're not retreating from any part of the world. Look at the Ukraine, look at our involvement in Eastern Europe. We have a huge number of forces stationed in the Middle East," he declared.

Hagel expressed his concern about "the dangerous unpredictability of a world that is I think trying to define a new world order." The United States, he insisted, has a responsibility to lead and shape that "new world order." The "dangerous unpredictability" to which Hagel refers, is a product of the eruption of the same irresolvable contradiction of capitalism—between global economy and the outmoded nation-state system—that resulted in two world wars last century. US imperialism is literally seeking to "shape" the entire globe in its interests. Through its increasingly reckless use of military force, it is plunging humanity toward another conflagration.

Only the international working class is capable of halting this drive to war through the abolition of the capitalist system that is its root cause. That requires the building of a unified, international anti-war movement on the basis of a socialist perspective and program, for which the the International Committee of the Fourth International alone fights.