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Controversy erupts over American B1 bomber deployments to Australia

By James Cogan

16 May 2015

A political controversy unfolded in Australia yesterday over whether the United States plans to base long-range B1 bombers in the country as part of the US “pivot” and military build-up in Asia against China.

The episode highlights two facts. Firstly, the preparations for war by the US and its allies are far more advanced than is known by masses of people. Secondly, governments, the military and the establishment media will shamelessly lie in order to keep the working class in the dark about the immense dangers that it confronts.

The controversy began with testimony by senior Obama administration officials on Wednesday to a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, entitled “Safeguarding American Interests in the East and South China Seas.” The hearing convened a day after a *Wall Street Journal* report revealed that Defense Secretary Ashton Carter requested plans be drawn up for a provocative deployment of US naval and/or air assets to challenge Chinese territorial claims over islands and reefs in the South China Sea.

US Secretary of State John Kerry will be in China this weekend, demanding that Beijing end the construction of alleged military infrastructure on disputed territories and asserting the “freedom of navigation” rights of the US to send warships into Chinese-claimed waters. Such a reckless

course of action by Washington could trigger war (see: “The growing danger of a US war against China”).

At the Senate hearing, David Shear, the US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, was asked by Democrat Senator Ben Cardin whether the deployment of US forces across Asia was a “direct response to additional challenges because of maritime security concerns” and if the US “had the assets in place to deal with these potential problems”—that is, a military confrontation with China.

Shear answered comprehensively and confidently, without referring to notes or consulting staff. He detailed aircraft and naval deployments to Japan, Singapore and Guam. He then stated: “We are undergoing an important shift in the way we posture our forces... we will be moving significant numbers of Marines to Hawaii, Guam and Australia. We will be placing additional air force assets in Australia as well, including B1 bombers and surveillance aircraft. We are looking at further deployments in the Philippines on a rotational basis once we have implemented the enhanced cooperation agreement... We will have a very strong presence...”

In Australia, the revelation that B1 bombers were to be based in the country, as part of US deployments against China, was reported on the Thursday evening news and in the newspapers on Friday morning. Australian Defence Department officials initially did not dispute Shear’s statements, telling Fairfax Media journalists only that the “specifics of future force posture cooperation are yet to be finalised.”

As public discussion swirled around the implications of a B1 bomber deployment, however, Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government went into damage-control.



A B1 Lancer’s deadly

arsenal

Defence Minister Kevin Andrews issued a statement asserting that Shear had “mis-spoke.”

Abbott then told a hastily convened media conference: “I understand that the official [Shear] mis-spoke and that the US does not have any plans to base those aircraft in Australia.” After reaffirming the US alliance, he claimed that it was “not aimed at anyone” but was for peace and stability in the region.

An unnamed Australian official blamed Shear's supposed "gaffe" on "a badly-prepared Pentagon brief." Another official asserted that "there has simply been no discussion with the Americans formally or informally about bloody B1s... basing is out of the question."

Within hours, the US embassy in Canberra issued its own statement via Twitter: "Contrary to reports, and to correct the record, the US has NO plans to rotate B1 bombers or surveillance aircraft in Australia."

These official denials are simply not credible. The Joint Posture Initiative agreed between the former Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the Obama administration, when the "pivot" was announced in November 2011, included agreements on the rotational deployment of aircraft. B-52 bombers have made periodic visits to northern Australian air bases ever since, on the understanding that they "neither confirm nor deny" whether they are armed with nuclear or conventional payloads.

These undertakings have been further enhanced at annual Australia-US ministerial (AUSMIN) talks. The November 2013 meetings, for example, agreed to "increased rotations of US Air Force aircraft in northern Australia."

Even if the Pentagon had not yet informed the Australian government, it was hardly a secret in the US military that such "rotations" would eventually include B1 bombers. The aircraft has been specifically assigned to long-range anti-ship missions as part of the military component of the "pivot."

In August 2012, Major General Michael Holmes, assistant deputy chief of staff for Air Force Operations, Plans and Requirements, told *USA Today*: "The B1's capabilities are particularly well-suited to the vast distances and unique challenges of the Pacific region." Citing an air force official, the article noted that B1s were being outfitted with "anti-ship missiles" and could "track ships at sea and launch the missiles from 'hundreds of miles' away."

Northern Australia is the ideal location to base B1s for a key aspect of the Pentagon's "AirSea Battle" strategic plan: a blockade of the key sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans to cripple the Chinese economy, and the destruction of Chinese naval or commercial ships attempting to break the blockade.

Shear's "mistake" was to publicly state the truth: the use of bases, airfields and ports in Australia by the US military and intelligence apparatus is explicitly bound up with preparations for war against China. Since the "pivot" was announced, the Australian political and media establishment has sought to maintain a conspiracy of silence and censorship about this fact. There has been almost no public discussion, let alone debate, except in rarified strategic and foreign policy circles, and every effort has been made to prevent opposition voices from being heard.

The attempts by Abbott and others to deny that the US-Australia alliance is directed against China are partly motivated by their desire to prevent, for as long as possible, a rupture in relations with China—Australia's largest export market and overall trading partner.

More fundamentally, however, the instinctive resort to lies reflects the immense nervousness in both Australian and American ruling circles over how masses of workers and young people will respond as they become conscious of the war danger.

With the Obama administration actively plotting a provocation in the South China Sea in the coming months or even weeks, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the establishment to prevent public discussion on the potentially catastrophic consequences of this reckless imperialist policy.