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Asia-Pacific

Trump's China aggression drawing Australia closer to war

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The Trump administration appears set on a confrontation with China sooner rather than later, and the Turnbull government has given every indication that it will be riding shotgun with the US when that happens. These are dangerous times.

Even before Trump was elected, he had made clear his belief that the US needed to slap down China, which he considers a threat to US domination of the Asia-Pacific. He is by no means the first president to take that view: Obama's so-called pivot to Asia was driven by the same assessment. But Trump is ramping up the rhetoric and dispensing with some of the diplomatic niceties.

During the Republican primaries, the billionaire blamed China for America's economic woes. He threatened to impose a 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports. He named the country a "currency manipulator" for allegedly suppressing the value of the yuan to make its exports cheaper. He threatened to hold up China's nomination as a "market economy" at the World Trade Organization, limiting its access to the full benefits of WTO membership.

How far Trump goes on each of these issues now that he is in office remains to be seen. But since his election, the direction of US foreign policy toward China has been unmistakable. There was his taking a phone call from the Taiwanese president, the first US president to do so since 1979. This was followed by tweets attacking China on trade and its stance on UN sanctions against North Korea. And, most significantly, Trump threw into question the "one China" policy, the basis of US-China relations for four decades.

Trump has named a string of China hawks to senior positions. They include national security adviser Michael Flynn, National Trade Council chief Peter Navarro (author of *Death by China*) and Robert Lightizer, appointed to head the Office of the US Trade Representative. Steve Bannon, Trump's chief political adviser and now member of the National Security Council, is another China basher. Bannon told a caller to his talkback show in March last year: "We're going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years, aren't we? There's no doubt about that".

But perhaps the most stunning confirmation of the aggressive turn by the new administration was a comment by new secretary of state Rex Tillerson. At his confirmation hearings, Tillerson threw all the diplomatic evasions out the window. On China's activities in the South China Sea, he declared: "We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island building stops and, second, your access to those islands is not going to be allowed".

All this comes in the context of Trump's plans to "rebuild" the US armed forces, including boosting the US naval deployment to the Asia-Pacific more aggressively than Obama's pivot. China for its part is rapidly expanding its military capabilities.

Australia and the US war machine

If the US and China come to blows in the South China Sea, Trump is looking to Australia and Japan, the US's two most longstanding allies in the region, as backup. This would mean drawing Australia ever closer to battle alongside the US.

Large parts of northern Australia are being prepared as a springboard for the US and Australia to fight wars in Asia.

So far as the US is concerned, Australia is ideally placed for this role because it is out of reach of most Chinese missiles, sits close to some of China's major trade routes and is therefore well positioned to attack Chinese shipping, and has a huge interior that can be used for live-fire exercises.

The US is already rotating 1,250 marines through a base in Darwin every six months, and there is an increase in the frequency of US warship visits. By 2020, the number of marines in the northern capital will double. While in the Northern Territory, the marines are being trained to seize and hold enemy territory. The US is also flying B-52 bombers from the Tindal RAAF base in Katherine. Although talks last year to base long-range B-1 bombers and aerial tankers in Darwin have stalled, they are a sign of things to come.

The US also has access to the North Australian Range Complex (Bradshaw, Mt Bunday and Delamere) for live-fire exercises. On the west coast, the government is spending nearly \$400 million to upgrade the Stirling naval base near Perth to turn it into a hub for visiting US warships and submarines operating in the Indian Ocean.

The Defence White Papers of 2013 and 2016 have set out substantial increases in military spending precisely to boost Australia's assistance to the US in the event of a conflict with China. While spending is being cut across other portfolios, the military is having money thrown at it, its budget rising from \$32 billion in 2016-17 to \$59 billion in 2025-26. A dozen new submarines, 100 new F35 fighter bombers and dozens more surface ships and surveillance aircraft will be acquired. All are designed to be "interoperable" with the US military – that is, ready to be deployed in combat alongside the US.

Future joint US-Australian military operations in Asia already feature in the biennial "Talisman Sabre" exercises, which involve 19,000 Australian and US personnel conducting land and sea exercises in Shoalwater Bay near Rockhampton. Like the base in Darwin, these exercises are designed to train military personnel to seize beachheads in enemy territory. In coming years, 14,000 military personnel from another strong US ally, Singapore, will also start annual exercises in Shoalwater Bay.

Of more military significance even than these facilities are the extensive military and intelligence cooperation shared by the two countries. Pine Gap satellite tracking station near Alice Springs and North West Cape (the Harold E. Holt Naval Communications Station) in Exmouth, Western Australia, are the jewels in the crown. These two stations allow the US and Australia to maintain 24-hour global surveillance of enemies, allies or, as Edward Snowden revealed, civilian populations at home.

As well as Pine Gap and North West Cape, the extensive intelligence sharing between members of the "Five-Eyes" partnership (the US, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Canada) involves three ground satellite stations at Kojarena, near Geraldton, along with surveillance facilities at HMAS Harman in the ACT, the Shoal Bay Receiving Station in Darwin and the Learmouth Solar Observatory in Western Australia. The US has also been invited by Australia to establish a maritime surveillance operation facility, including an airstrip for aircraft and drones, in the Cocos Islands, 3,000 kilometres north-west of Perth.

Such is Australia's importance to US war planning that US Pacific command chief Harry Harris told a Senate committee in Washington in February last year that the US relied "heavily" on Australia for its advanced military capabilities. The US cannot launch a single ballistic missile, guide a single drone or provide signals to a single ship or submarine operating anywhere from the Arabian Gulf to California without intelligence provided by Australia. We are embedded at the heart of the US war machine, even without a single shot by the Australian army, navy or air force.

Turnbull government backs Trump

Trump's China aggression drawing Australia closer to war

The Turnbull government is egging Trump on with his aggressive foreign policy. The prime minister and his cabinet colleagues are determined to ensure that the US stays focused on the Asia-Pacific, and they are even more anxious that it do so now that Trump has abandoned one of the linchpins of Obama's pivot – the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

On Trump's election, Turnbull told reporters that "a stronger United States means a safer world". Foreign minister Julie Bishop has urged the US to "maintain a strong presence" in the Asia-Pacific. In the aftermath of Trump's inauguration, Turnbull emphasised the warm relationship between the two imperialist powers: "We have fought side by side with the United States in every major conflict since the First World War and the relationship is very, very engaged, it's very close, and it operates at so many levels ... It's not just between two leaders, it's at every level".

The Labor Party, loyal to the US alliance to the last, has barely said a peep. In response to Turnbull and Bishop's comments, shadow foreign minister Penny Wong simply "encouraged constructive US engagement in our region". No-one on the shadow benches has rejected Tillerson's calls for a confrontation with China. And shadow defence minister Richard Marles has been openly demanding that the Turnbull government send the Australian navy to join highly provocative US "freedom of navigation" operations in the South China Sea.

Some former political leaders and senior defence bureaucrats, such as Paul Keating and Hugh White, are apprehensive about Trump's bellicose rhetoric towards China and are urging the Turnbull government not to follow the US into a conflict that could have potentially disastrous consequences for Australian trade and investment. But for now at least, in terms of Australia's military posture and forward planning for the armed forces, the Australian government is showing no signs of slowing a confrontation with China alongside the United States.

We have to put a stop to this escalation of Australia's involvement in war planning in the Asia-Pacific. Our leaders talk about ensuring US "engagement" in the region. Let's remember what this means. US engagement since the outbreak of the Pacific war in 1941 has cost the lives of millions of civilians and those of hundreds of thousands of US and Australian military personnel as well. More such engagement in a confrontation with China could have incalculable and ruinous consequences in blood and treasure.

The US empire has never been anything but barbaric – from dropping the atomic bomb on Japan and supporting the slaughter in Indonesia in 1965 to invading Vietnam and Cambodia and propping up murderous dictators all over the region.

Now the empire is in the hands of a leader who is lashing out in every direction, threatening still more death and destruction. It's more than past time that Australia broke military ties with the US war machine and abandoned its support for the empire.

5 February 2017

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