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Australian think tank outlines US plans for war against China

By Peter Symonds

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The US and its allies, in particular Australia and Japan, are engaged in advanced preparations for war with China. A paper released yesterday, entitled “Planning the unthinkable war: ‘AirSea Battle’ and its implications for Australia,” by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has provided an outline of the war plans.

The “AirSea Battle” strategy developed over the past three years by the Pentagon is integral to the Obama administration’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, aimed at containing China on every front—diplomatically, economically and militarily. Amid a worsening global economic breakdown, the US is determined to use its military might to offset its economic decline and prevent China from becoming a challenge to its hegemony in Asia and the world.

According to the report’s author, ASPI analyst Ben Schreer: “The Pentagon has started to ‘think about the unthinkable’: a military strategy for fighting and winning a potential war against China.” AirSea Battle is presented as a defensive strategy against a potential Chinese attack—a response to the developing military capabilities of China’s Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) that are “gradually eroding America’s maritime dominance in the Western Pacific.”

The “unthinkable” would be catastrophic. The Pentagon envisages a war, largely fought with US warships, warplanes and missiles, that would devastate China’s military infrastructure, without necessitating an invasion of the Chinese mainland, and impose a crippling economic blockade.

As described in the ASPI paper, AirSea Battle would counter Chinese strategies “by withstanding an initial Chinese attack, followed by a ‘blinding campaign’ against PLA command and control networks, a ‘missile suppression campaign’ against China’s land-based systems, and a ‘distant blockade’ against Chinese merchant ships in the Malacca Straits and elsewhere.”

The assumption behind the US strategy is that “escalation can be kept below the nuclear threshold”—that is, a fully-fledged nuclear war could be avoided. But as Schreer points out, “a blinding campaign could increase the risk of a disproportionate Chinese response, including nuclear escalation.” In other words, if the US destroys China’s ability to monitor incoming American missiles and thus a US nuclear attack, Beijing could be forced to unleash its own nuclear arsenal.

The Pentagon’s AirSea Battle plans are not just on the drawing board. The US has already begun an extensive restructuring of its military in the Asia Pacific. This includes the hardening of frontline military bases to withstand missile attack, the dispersal of forces more broadly in the region, the concentration of 60 percent of US naval assets in Asia, as announced last year, and the development of a new generation of weaponry designed to wage a naval/aerial war off the Chinese mainland. At the same time, using North Korea as a pretext, the US, in collaboration with Japan, is constructing anti-ballistic missile systems in the region that are designed for fighting a nuclear war with China.

Japan and Australia, designated “key enablers”, are central to the Pentagon’s war plans, which assume that both countries “will be active allies throughout the campaign”. Japan would be on the frontline of any war with China. The Pentagon regards US bases, especially in Okinawa, as a key component of its plans to hem in Chinese warships and submarines, and the Japanese military as an essential supplement to its own forces.

The ASPI paper focuses on the implications for Australia, which is viewed by Washington as a vital base of operations, especially for mounting an economic blockade of China by cutting vital shipping lanes through South East Asia. Around 80 percent of Chinese energy imports from the Middle East and Africa pass through the Malacca Strait—a key chokepoint between Malaysia and Singapore.

Already the Australian Labor government has agreed to host a US Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) in Darwin and open other Australian bases to US warships and warplanes. While Prime Minister Julia Gillard has played down the significance of the US Marines, ASPI points out: “MAGTFs such as the one in Darwin could play a role in securing critical maritime chokepoints in South East Asia.” The US is further pressing the Australian government to

develop military capacities, such as long-range submarines, that could be used to target Chinese shipping and naval assets.

The US military preparations have intensified the dilemma facing the Australian ruling class, which is economically dependent on China, but relies on the US militarily to defend its interests in Asia. Sharp tactical differences over how to resolve this conundrum divide the political establishment—the Labor government and the Liberal-National opposition alike.

Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd became a political casualty of Obama's "pivot" in June 2010. He was ousted in an inner-party coup by pro-US powerbrokers, not because he opposed the US alliance, but because his call for a US rapprochement with China cut across Obama's confrontational "rebalancing" against China. Just weeks earlier, Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who espoused similar policies to Rudd, resigned following a concerted campaign against him by Washington. Their replacements in Australia and Japan—the two "key enablers" for AirSea Battle—have fully supported the Pentagon's plans.

The ASPI paper, like the Pentagon, presents the AirSea Battle strategy as purely defensive. But the US has over the past decade waged one war of aggression after another in Afghanistan and Iraq, followed by neo-colonial interventions in Libya and Syria. In his bid to undermine Chinese influence in the Asia Pacific, Obama has deliberately inflamed dangerous flashpoints, including the Korean Peninsula, and fostered new ones by encouraging allies such as Japan and the Philippines to aggressively pursue their maritime disputes with China.

Even the ASPI report acknowledges the dangers inherent in the Pentagon's war preparations. "Surely, a Sino-US war not only seems a remote possibility but would be catastrophic for the region in general," it states. "No-one wants war, but deterrence strategy follows a paradoxical logic: in order to deter war and preserve the peace, the defender has to signal credibility in both intention and capability to go to war with the potential aggressor." This is the logic of an arms race, escalating tensions and the slide toward conflict and war.

As far as ASPI analyst Schreer is concerned, the Australian government has no alternative but to sign up to the US war preparations. He suggests that Canberra press Washington to provide more details, when in reality secret deals have undoubtedly already been struck. Last year *Australian* journalist David Uren revealed that the Labor government's 2009 Defence White Paper contained a secret chapter assessing "Australia's ability to fight an air-sea battle alongside the United States against China." Schreer recommends that the US war plans remain secret, advising the government to support AirSea Battle, while not publicly endorsing it.

Behind the backs of the working class—in Australia, the US, China and the world—a new and more terrible war is being prepared by American imperialism and its allies.