Another hinge for the Pacific Pivot: Australia's nuclear navy?

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One of the hinges in the Pacific pivot is closer alignment of the US and its longterm allies, especially Japan, Korea and Australia. In the case of Australia, there is scarcely any need for American effort on the matter. The Rudd and Gillard governments, in the Australian tradition of taking the initiative to draw the imperial protector closer still, have not only signed up to US proposals expanding the already substantial US military and intelligence presence in Australia, but have actively sought it - mainly under the rubric of a threat from China' Australia's largest trading partner.

Last week Peter Hartcher of the Sydney Morning Herald reported that prime minister Julia Gillard "PM had cold feet on US base plan" prior to the visit of President Obama in November 2011 to announce the deployment of a Marine Air-Ground Task Force to Darwin. A US participant acknowledged the gravity of the decision more honestly than most Australian observers: "As you get closer, you realise the momentous nature of it." But all this puzzled the Americans because, reports Hartcher, "the idea of possible US troop deployments to Australia was first proposed by Canberra in 2010."

Immediately after the US election the cycle resumed. On November 10 Hartcher reported Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell's concern that the Gillard government was cutting Australian defence spending and promised Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta would raise the matter at this week's AUSMIN meetings with Australian counterparts.

The Australian Financial Review reported that as a counter to China's "maritime threat", senior Liberal Party opposition figures have been in discussions with unnamed US officials about thinking

about replacing Australia's decrepit Collins-class submarines (the ones where operations at sea appear to have been an optional extra in the design specifications) with leased US nuclear-powered attack submarines. US ambassador to Australia confirmed a similar offer earlier in the year. Fringe military and thinktank circles in Australia have been urging leasing a number of the US Navy's Virginia-class 8,000 tonne fast attack submarines. Facing half a trillion dollars of defence cuts, the US itself is uncertain about how many of the SSNs it can afford.

The nuclear submarines push for the Australian navy raises at least three key issues.

The first is technological dependence for a country ostensibly pursuing defence self-reliance. As former Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Dibb and former Chief Defence Scientist - no alliance radicals they - remarked at the time of an earlier version of the current push:

"The likely need for direct American support for the nuclear power plant would put at risk Australia's capacity for independent sovereign action. In effect, the submarine arm of the Royal Australian Navy would become a subordinate arm of the US Navy. Independence would become subservience."

The second is the fit with Australia's actual defence requirements, especially given the current bizarre reading of the "China threat", and its obverse, the reaction of the neighbours to such a mismatch of strategic reality and force structure hardening and expansion, especially Indonesia.

The third is the encouragement that would be given to the pushes for both a nuclear power industry in Australia and a return to Australian thinking about nuclear weapons. Neither is a rational response to Australia's energy and security needs, but both are on the agendas of some powerful voices in Australia.

Meanwhile, after the Defence Department asserted that a secret Australia-US military cooperation coordinating document arising out of the 2010 AUSMIN meeting, the *Australia-United States Force Posture Review Working Group Statement of Principles*, did not exist, a Fairfax freedom of information application forced the department to back track. However, it said, the document, including discussion of US access to Australian bases, pre-positioning of US forces, and training of US forces in Australia, would not be released due to United States objections.

Sailors beware.

- Richard Tanter, NAPSNet Contributor

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org