Australia in the Pacific pivot: national interests and the expanding “joint facilities”

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by Richard Tanter

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I. Introduction

Richard Tanter notes grave concerns raised by former Australian prime ministers concerning strategic policy towards China, and potential differences between Australian and US interests. The annual Australia-United States ministerial coordinating meeting brought an unprecedented level of Australian support for American space military capacities and closer technical integration through an escalating number of "joint facilities". Tanter concludes by noting that "without the capacity to recognize and act on national interests, a country with a parliamentary democracy operates under a severe democratic deficit. Without that capacity, democratic policy formation about defence becomes a contradiction in terms, and more to the point, a dangerous impossibility."

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II. Report by Richard Tanter

Australia in the Pacific pivot: national interests and the expanding "joint facilities"
by Richard Tanter

It has been an extraordinary situation in Australia for the last few weeks on the American alliance front:

- Three of the five living former Australian prime ministers have spoken out strongly about the direction of Australian foreign policy and its lack of independence.
- A former Labor defence minister, echoing opposition Liberal heavyweights, has called on the Navy to acquire United States nuclear-powered submarines, with the US ambassador helpfully confirming American willingness to help out.

- The Defence Department first denied the existence of a high-level joint Australia- United States strategic planning document, then found it, and then said the US was preventing its release.
- All of this was capped off by the now almost traditional announcement of new levels of enmeshment in US military planning and new "joint facilities", bringing an unprecedented level of Australian support for American space military systems. [1]

Malcolm Fraser, Paul Keating, and even Kevin Rudd

Malcolm Fraser, Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd are all former Australian prime ministers about as far apart as you get in political orientation and intellectual style, but each has spoken out in the past month or so about the uncritical alignment of the current Australian government with the Obama administration's shift towards a policy of military containment of China.

Rudd, long the hawk on China, spoke out cautiously but firmly in Singapore on the need for a Pax Pacifica to be on cooperative security as an alternative to both Pax Americana and a possible Pax Sinica, consciously building "the habits, customs and norms of security and strategic cooperation from the ground up". Fluff from a China hawk? Perhaps, but he was surely speaking for a great number of people in many countries when he said that in this time of globalisation and economic interdependence,

"it is extraordinary that we could even be having a conversation about the possibility of future conflict in Asia."[2]

And that is surely the bottom line of all the talk about US AirSea Battle planning, and the Pacific pivot: the use of military force at some point to restrain the emergence of China as a great power after centuries of weakness.

Fraser and Keating were a great deal sharper, with both deeply concerned about the willingness – and indeed enthusiasm – of the Gillard government to embrace the most hawkish versions of US strategic objectives towards China. Both noted the incapacity of the government to identify Australia national interests and where they may diverge from those of the United States over China policy.

Reminding Australians of the historically clear limits of American commitments to Australia in the ANZUS alliance, Fraser warned of the folly of the lurch towards containment of under the Obama administration, pointing out that China is not the Soviet Union of 1946; that there are extraordinarily close economic ties between the US and China; and that this *faux* containment was both unlikely to succeed and highly likely to provoke. Fraser's fundamental and urgent message was the need for independence of thinking and a capacity to distinguish Australian from American interests:

"It is time we stopped thinking of ourselves as supplicants and started to think for ourselves as a people who are prepared to stand up."

The packed Melbourne University audience erupted when the former Liberal Party prime minister exclaimed:

"Oh how, in today's world, I envy New Zealand."[3]

Keating echoed Fraser's concern for independence of thought in more colourful and forceful language, lashing the Gillard government, and especially its acceptance of President Obama's "oral and policy assault on China and its polity, from the lower chamber of our Parliament House":

"Our sense of independence has flagged and as it flagged, we have rolled back into an easy accommodation with the United States…More latterly, our respect for the foreign policy objectives of the United States has superimposed itself on what should otherwise be the foreign policy objectives of Australia."[4]

AUSMIN 2012 – aligning partners in an asymmetrical alliance

So, what is happening to give rise to this unlikely solidarity amongst Fraser, Keating , and even Rudd? The answer was clear at the AUSMIN meeting between Australian and United States defence and foreign ministers in Perth in early November. AUSMIN is the annual meeting where the Australian and US governments align and declare their policies and security narratives, and announce major military and intelligence initiatives in the asymmetrical military cooperation that characterises the ANZUS (albeit minus the NZ) alliance.

Even before the Perth meeting the question of who was running the show surfaced quite starkly. 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.[5] Without apparent embarrassment, Defence officials then said the document, including discussion of US access to Australian bases, pre-positioning of US forces, and training of US forces in Australia, did indeed exist, but would not be released due to United States objections.[6]

A few days after the saga of the non-existent/existing-but-locked-up-by-the-US alliance-aligning document, senior Liberal Party figures strongly backed a recommendation from the Centre for Independent Studies [7] for the Australian Navy to lease US nuclear-powered attack submarines rather than repeat the fiasco of the Australian-built – and largely non-operational – *Collins*-class submarines.[8] Labor's former Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon, who had signed off on key AUSMIN agreements to expand the US defence presence in Australia, then went public with his support for US nuclear submarines for the RAN. 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.

An earlier version of the nuclear navy proposal prompted former Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Dibb, an undoubted alliance loyalist, and former Chief Defence Scientist Richard Brabin-Smith to speak out about the obvious implications for Australian defence self-reliance and strategic independence:

"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." [9]

In Perth, the AUSMIN lead actors came on stage: Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta, and Stephen Smith and Bob Carr – each with supporting casts of officials. This year's AUSMIN continued the pattern begun well before Fitzgibbon and continued enthusiastically under Defence Minister Stephen Smith to expand the technological integration of Australian defence forces with those of the United States, and to increase the number, size and sophistication of US military facilities in Australia.[10]

Most Australian commentators noted ongoing planning for US naval access and probable home-porting at HMAS Stirling in Perth, the news of which had emerged earlier in the year. No details of

the work on this issue by AUSMIN working groups were forthcoming in Perth, but in July a widely publicised report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies report to the Pentagon from a former national Security Council senior staffer left no doubt of US interest in an Indian Ocean homeport for an aircraft carrier group.[11]

More "joint facilities", space cooperation and Pacific pivot

In fact, the most important announcements – though some were *sotto voce* - involved concerned space systems cooperation with the United States, which the American press recognized quite clearly as "the latest sign of US pivot toward Asia". [12] Three developments were particularly important:

- a recycled US space radar for North West Cape for space junk and for tracking adversary satellites;
- a highly advanced state of art US deep space telescope for an unnamed location capable of tracking microsatellites; and
- a new "combined communications gateway" to provide – but at the same time closely supervise – Australian access to a US constellation of satellites providing global communications coverage.

North West Cape space radar

Building on the Space Situational Awareness (SSA) Partnership signed at AUSMIN 2010, a new agreement was signed in Perth this year as "a demonstration of our commitment to closer space cooperation". This authorized the transfer of a US space-tracking radar from Antigua in the West Indies to the Harold E. Holt Naval Communication Station at North West Cape in Western Australia.[13] The C-band (4-8Ghz) mechanical radar was used at Antigua primarily for tracking space US launches from Cape Canaveral. In Australia, under the auspices of the US Joint Space Operations Center, it will be operated jointly in Australia to track satellites in low earth orbit (LEO - up to 1,000 kms altitude), missile launches from countries in the region, and, as a global public good, low earth orbit space junk. The recycled C-band radar is intended to give the ADF with an opportunity "to grow an SSA capability".[14] The Pentagon, facing a budget crunch, is still to decide whether a more advanced new and powerful phased array S-band (2-4 Ghz) radar similar to one announced to be deployed in the Pacific atoll of Kwajalein will be deployed in Western Australia or on the British Atlantic island of Ascension.[15]

DARPA telescope to track Chinese satellites in geo-stationary orbits

SSN radars can detect objects in geo-synchronous orbits (GEO) around 36,000 kms altitude to some extent, but searching in GEO is "time-consuming and difficult", while telescopes can do so much more readily.[16] At AUSMIN the two countries decided to "work towards" re-deployment of one of a highly advanced Space Surveillance Telescope from New Mexico to Australia. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) took over ten years to build this electro-optical scope, which only achieved first light in October 2011.[17]

According to Pentagon officials, the SST "will offer an order-of-magnitude improvement over ground-based electro-optical deep space surveillance, or GEODSS, telescopes [three of which are located on Diego Garcia] in search rate and the ability to detect and track satellites".[18] Also operating under the auspices of the US Joint Space Operations Center, the STT will be "able to search an area in space the size of the United States in seconds" and "is capable of detecting a small laser pointer on top of New York City's Empire State Building from a distance equal to Miami, Florida."[19]

The SST will be particularly important for tracking satellites and space debris in geo-synchronous orbits, including micro-satellites. There are now a large number of Chinese military intelligence, communications, and global positioning satellites in geo-synchronous earth orbits (GEO). The Pentagon said 'the Australians are in the process of selecting a site for the SST."[20]

The Geraldton communications gateway – managing the Five Eyes alliance hierarchy

A Military Satellite Communications Partnership Statement of Principles signed at AUSMIN 2008 formalised a rapidly developing integration of US and Australian military satellite communications systems. The Perth meeting brought an announcement that the two countries are in discussions about establishing a "Combined Communications Gateway" in Western Australia to "provide both Australia and the United States greater access to the Wideband Global Satellite communications constellation".

The AUSMIN 2008 agreement resulted in the construction of a series of joint military communications facilities built within the Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station at Kojarena near Geraldton in Western Australia.[21] A new facility built at Kojarena now provides ground terminal links to the constellation of US satellites making up the US Mobile User Objective System (MUOS) – a narrow-band ultra-high frequency tactical communications system. The Kojarena MUOS facility is one of four MUOS ground stations, with the others being located Niscemi in Sicily (Naval Air Station Sigonella), Wahiawa in Hawaii, and Virginia.[22] The second joint facility built at Kojarena followed Australia's purchase of one of the seven Wideband Global Satellite (WGS) satellites launched by the US, potentially providing the ADF access to the global WGS system.

This year's AUSMIN announcement of a Combined Communications Gateway will closely link to the WGS facility at Kojarena, and may be co-located, and will provide "a dual nation access point" to the WGS system.[23] In US military parlance, "communications gateway" refers to the hardware, software and organizational interface protocols that enables different communications systems to link effectively – and appropriately given the realities of hierarchical access to information and capabilities. This has been a growing problem for the United States in matching the technology of networked warfare with its drive for communications interoperability with and between its alliance partners – such as NATO member countries, or, in a more exclusive club, the Five-Eyes or AUSCANNZUKUS (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, and US) countries. A network of allied combined organizations such as the Combined Communications Electronics Board (CCEB) and the American, British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Armies' Program (ABCA) organize the practicalities of the complex interoperability standards and procedures, communications protocols and security hierarchy of alliances with different – and fluctuating - levels of trust.[24] One aspect of a gateway in such a communication system is to preserve security concerns about access to information amongst a hierarchy of allies, not all of which are trusted with the same levels of access.

Impediments to recognizing Australian national interests

The questions that Keating and Fraser ask about the apparent inability of Australian governments to recognize the points at which Australia's national interests diverge from those of its major ally are highly relevant to assessing these developments in Australian-US cooperation in military space technology. Identifying national interests is not the same as a blindly nationalist outlook. And they are certainly not the end of the discussion. There is a global human interest and a responsibility to the planet to be taken into account. But without the capacity to recognize and act on national interests, a country with a parliamentary democracy operates under a severe democratic deficit.

We need to think about the ways in which the alliance, as interpreted by governments that seem unable to distinguish Australian from American interests, enmesh us in America's planning for wars

that we should not be part of. The question of sovereignty is central to all these facilities. These are concerns that Desmond Ball was raising more 30 years ago in his discussions of Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape.[25]

We are at peculiarly dangerous time strategically.[26] If anything, Fraser, Keating and Rudd have understated those dangers, both in range and severity. As Kevin Rudd said, to speaking of war between China and the US is almost unbelievable. But the fact is that some people in influential positions are. The danger for Australia lies in the combination of enthusiastic and uncritical Australian government support for US hawks on China together with the technical integration of Australian and US military systems through the escalating number of "joint facilities".

Australians need to ask the Australian government simple but serious questions about the implications of the politico-technical systems involved in these space facilities, and keep pursuing rational and responsible answers beyond spin – and contempt – for the public's capacity to decide its view on the basis of comprehensive and reliable information.

- How will the government ensure that no operations of the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap contribute to a nuclear attack on any country?
- How will the government ensure that the planned deployment of the space radar facility and Space Surveillance Telescope at North West Cape under the auspices of the US Joint Space Operations Center will not contribute to armed conflict in space and possible escalation into nuclear war?
- How will the government ensure that ADF reliance for its own main military communications on the capacities of United States worldwide military communications systems is compatible with Australia's capacity for independent action in the face of US opposition?
- Under the US policy of "rebalancing to Asia", including the application of the Air-Sea Battle Concept to offset China's defence of its home waters, how will the Australian government ensure that that US forces deployed to ADF facilities will not be drawn into an escalation to nuclear conflict?

The fundamental issues are whether an Australian government retains its sovereign power to ensure that American facilities it hosts are not used against the interests of Australia, or that the integration of Australia with US forces does not render independent choice by Australia impossible. Without that capacity, democratic policy formation about defence becomes a contradiction in terms, and more to the point, a dangerous impossibility.

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IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: napsnet@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author's name and affiliation.

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