

What was Washington's role in the coup against Australian prime minister Rudd?

James Cogan
15 July 2010

As more information drips out, the role of Washington in the June 24 political coup against former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd looms ever larger. It is increasingly apparent that the Obama administration had become concerned that Rudd was wavering in his support for the crisis-racked US-led occupation of Afghanistan, and that one of the driving forces for his ousting may well have been US insistence that the Australian government—a key US ally—align itself unconditionally with Obama's intensification of the criminal war.

Rudd's replacement, Julia Gillard, has certainly delivered. From the day the coup took place she has stressed her total commitment to the US alliance and the Afghan war. On Monday, in an opinion piece published in major daily newspapers, she repudiated an announcement made by Defence Minister John Faulkner on June 23—just hours before the coup plot against Rudd went into action—that the Labor government would consider withdrawing Australian troops from Afghanistan within two to four years.

Gillard wrote: "Bringing home our troops cannot be to a pre-set timetable." The war was at a "critical stage" and "we must maintain our commitment to seeing it through". Her government, she stressed, "will remain steadfast to the mission we have set ourselves in Afghanistan".

Four days earlier, Faulkner, one of Rudd's closest advisors, announced that he would not continue as defence minister if Labor won the coming election. Military analyst and political insider Hugh White dismissed Faulkner's claim that the decision was for personal reasons and alleged his resignation was due to his alarm over the rise in Australian casualties and his belief that the Afghan war was a lost cause. If this is true, then Faulkner's June 23 announcement of a withdrawal timetable indicates that Rudd had formed similar views.

Faulkner's resignation, followed by Gillard's announcement of an indefinite deployment of Australian troops to Afghanistan, helps answer one of the outstanding questions concerning the June 24 coup. What changed between the morning of Tuesday, June 22, when the entire Labor parliamentary caucus endorsed Rudd's leadership, and the evening of June 23, when Gillard walked into Rudd's office and informed him he would be removed as prime minister the next morning?

The events preceding the coup strongly suggest that tensions over Afghanistan had so poisoned relations between the Obama administration and Rudd that, amidst a campaign by major corporate concerns to destabilise the Labor government, Washington secured certain guarantees from Gillard and then intervened to seal his fate.

Last December, Rudd ruled out the dispatch of any further Australian troops to Afghanistan when the White House announced its "surge" of 30,000 additional US troops and called for its allies to commit more

forces. Rudd insisted that an increase in the Australian contingent from 1,100 to 1,550 personnel in May 2009 was sufficient to demonstrate his government's commitment to the war and the US-Australia military alliance.

Rudd also insisted that the primary role of the Australian forces should remain the training of a brigade of Afghan government troops in the southern province of Uruzgan. They would not participate in the offensives into Helmand and Kandahar provinces that US commanders were planning as part of the surge. He also pointedly refused to allow Australian forces to take over operational command of Uruzgan when a Dutch contingent was slated to withdraw from the province in August. As a result, US troops will have to be deployed into the area, diverting them from operations elsewhere.

Publicly, the Obama administration refrained from criticising the Australian position and praised Rudd as a reliable ally. In March, however, veteran journalist Rafael Epstein published a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan at the time, General Stanley McChrystal, had had a "bitter exchange" with the chief of the Australian Defence Forces, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston.

According to Epstein's sources, McChrystal told Houston in December 2009 that "the Rudd government's refusal to allow Australian troops to take the fight to the Taliban was impairing the US-led war effort". The US general allegedly warned that Rudd's refusal to allow Australian troops to deploy outside of Uruzgan into the regions being targeted by Obama's surge was doing "permanent damage" to "the US perception of Australia's military commitment".

Epstein also reported that the White House and the Pentagon intended to vent their anger and frustration during a visit to Australia in January by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. The visit was cancelled, however, due to the Haiti earthquake.

Two planned visits to Australia by Obama himself were also cancelled, the first ostensibly due to the stalemate in passing his health legislation and the second due to the BP oil spill. Given Rudd's ultimate fate, the cancelled visits take on a new significance.

Prior to the coup, Rudd and Faulkner had taken steps to appease US dissatisfaction with their Afghan policy. Australian special forces were made available for use in Kandahar province. The result, however, was some of the heaviest fighting yet seen, and a spike in the Australian death toll.

One third of all Australian casualties in Afghanistan since the October

2001 invasion, a total of 17 killed and 143 wounded, have occurred this year—a direct result of Obama’s surge. In June, more than 100 soldiers of the US-led occupation force were killed in the space of one month for the first time. The casualties suffered by Afghan resistance fighters and civilians have run into the many thousands.

The Australian losses coincided with a deepening crisis of the Rudd government. Popular dissatisfaction over a range of Labor policies, including the war, was being exploited and manipulated by the Murdoch media and major mining magnates. The mining corporations began financing a multi-million dollar advertising blitz, denouncing the proposed Resource Super Profits Tax (RSPT) as a threat to jobs and investment. Opinion polling showing a collapse in electoral support for Labor was trumpeted in the media as evidence that Rudd would be swept from office, and utilised to fan speculation about a leadership challenge by Gillard.

On Tuesday, June 22, however, it appeared that Rudd had survived. The entire Labor caucus met that morning for the last time before an eight-week winter break, with no challenge being made. The Labor politicians were reassured that, even with the decline in the opinion polls, the numbers still meant the government would be returned to power. At the same time, Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan were making moves to strike a deal with the mining companies in order to bury the RSPT controversy.

The next day, Faulkner announced a tentative timetable for troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, with the clear aim of placating popular opposition to the mounting Australian deaths and to the war itself. An Essential Media Communications opinion poll in June showed 61 percent of respondents wanted the withdrawal of Australian troops, an increase of 11 percent compared with 15 months earlier.

“What it means is that at some point within that two to four year time frame we would see our training mission transition to an overwatch role,” Faulkner told a press conference. “And that would obviously mean at that time we would start to see a reduction of the number of Australian troops in Afghanistan.”

It is now known that Labor MP and former union boss Bill Shorten had approached Gillard two weeks earlier and guaranteed that he and other factional powerbrokers would ensure she had the numbers to defeat Rudd in a leadership ballot. Gillard had refused, however, and she did not mount a challenge during Tuesday’s caucus meeting.

The Australian media has attempted to ascribe the shift in Gillard’s position over the following 24 hours to her sense of “betrayal” over the revelation that Rudd’s aides had been approaching Labor parliamentarians to shore up his factional support in the caucus. The rapidly deepening crisis in Afghanistan and within the Obama administration itself—along with Gillard’s actions since the coup—makes US intervention a far more likely scenario.

Faulkner’s announcement on Afghanistan would doubtless have been greeted with fury in Washington, and could well have been the final straw in its relationship with Rudd. Some key operative could simply have informed Gillard and/or her backers that it was time to act, and that if she did so, it would be with US support.

Nine years since the invasion of Afghanistan, the longest war in US history, Obama’s surge has failed to stem the growth of the Taliban-led Afghan resistance, let alone hold out the prospect of victory over the insurgency. American and NATO casualties are soaring, the puppet government of Hamid Karzai is viewed as corrupt and illegitimate and its security forces are dysfunctional.

The US ruling elite, however, cannot and will not walk away from their criminal attempt to transform Afghanistan into an American puppet state. Such a policy would amount to surrendering control of the resources of Central Asia to geo-political rivals such as China and Russia. On the precisely the day that the coup went into operation against Rudd—Wednesday June 23—General Stanley McChrystal was sacked from his command of US and NATO forces and replaced with General David Petraeus. In the weeks since, Petraeus has signalled a major escalation in the violence against the Afghan people, with moves to lift restrictions on air strikes that may cause civilian casualties.

The Obama administration had a clear interest in reversing Australia’s withdrawal timeframe. Numerous US allies that have supplied troops are facing mounting popular opposition and are increasingly nervous about being embroiled in a war without end. With the Netherlands and Canada already preparing to withdraw, the Rudd government’s stance could have become the starting point for a wider abandonment of the US-led occupation. Did Washington wish to send a signal around the world that governments or leaders who waver on their commitment do so at their own peril?

While much still remains unknown, it is highly unlikely that Washington, the CIA and the US embassy in Canberra were not deeply involved in the anti-democratic conspiracy to depose Rudd—just as they were in the 1975 coup that brought down the Whitlam Labor government.

Rudd certainly appears to have concluded that the US had a hand in the coup. *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Peter Hartcher reported from the US on Monday that Rudd had “irritated some senior US officials in the past fortnight in numerous calls to Washington”. One official told Hartcher: “Kevin has been whiny and mopey. There’s been too much ‘if only’ this and ‘if only’ that. He needs to just suck it up and get on with things.”

According to Hartcher, Obama telephoned Rudd following the coup, before he called Gillard. The president allegedly conveyed his “shock”, before pointedly suggesting Rudd may want to seek a career outside politics. Obama apparently let Rudd know that he would provide assistance for the former prime minister to obtain a lucrative international position—presumably similar to those enjoyed by the likes of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and former US President Bill Clinton. If he were to avail himself of the opportunity, Rudd, who is married to a multi-millionaire, could grow even richer. The price, of course, would be to keep quiet on the circumstances of the coup and “just suck it up”.

Obama allegedly concluded the phone call by making clear to Rudd that he “looked forward” to working with Gillard.

The attitude of the White House and the broader US political establishment to Gillard’s installation was spelt out on Tuesday by Kurt Campbell, Obama’s Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

In comments provided to the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s Hartcher, Campbell stated: “Not that we needed any reassurance, but nevertheless we are deeply appreciative of the continuity, of the statements of strong support [from Gillard] on the centrality of the US-Australia alliance, and all I can say is the President’s very much looking forward to working with the new prime minister...”

An Australian official in Washington told Hartcher that the US

establishment was not concerned about Gillard or the manner in which she had risen to power, “because they know her and they know her views”.

At a speech in 2008 to the Australian American Leadership Dialogue Gillard had told the assembled audience: “Our alliance is bigger than any person, bigger than any party, bigger than any period in our history together.”

Among the issues that will be not be canvassed or discussed in the course of the forthcoming Australian election campaign is what role US imperialism played in refashioning the Australian government and the commitment of Gillard to intensify its support for the criminal US-led war in Afghanistan, and for US militarism around the world.

The author also recommends:

Australia’s political coup leaders and their big business connections
[10 July 2010]

The Australian Labor Party coup: a warning to the working class
[28 June 2010]

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact