

Australia aligns with US against China's geopolitical rise

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The underlying theme of the 25th annual AUSMIN talks between the American and Australian governments yesterday in Melbourne was Washington's alarm over China's growing economic strength, military reach and political assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration is attempting to forge a network of strategic and military alliances to contain Beijing and challenge its efforts to assert greater regional influence.

The AUSMIN (Australia-US Ministerial) meeting involved Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates on the US side, and Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd and Defence Minister Stephen Smith. The talks formed part of a diplomatic offensive being conducted by the Obama administration in the Asia-Pacific. Clinton also visited Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand over the past 10 days, and Barack Obama moved on from India today for talks over the next week with the governments of Indonesia, Japan and South Korea.

The outcome of the Melbourne talks is that the Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has committed Australian imperialism to functioning as one component in an anti-China front in the region. While the AUSMIN communiqué referred to seeking a "positive, cooperative relationship with China," a raft of military and strategic undertakings between the US and Australia has left no informed observer in any doubt that they are aggressive moves against Beijing.

The Gillard government has agreed that the US Navy will make more frequent visits to military bases such as those in Townsville and Darwin in northern Australia. American forces will conduct more frequent exercises with the Australian military and "pre-deploy" greater quantities of equipment, including munitions, spare parts

and supplies, on Australian territory. The greater use of Australian facilities will facilitate an expanded US presence in the Indian Ocean, South East Asia and the South West Pacific—all areas where China has major economic interests and ambitions to expand its naval activity.

Even more provocatively, the communiqué expressed joint US-Australian support for a "peaceful resolution" to the territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas, directly challenging China's insistence that third parties like the US have no role in deciding the future of disputed territories such as the Spratlys and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The document also asserted a "common interest" in "freedom of navigation" in the region's oceans and searoutes—a euphemism for the untrammelled right of the US and allied naval forces to enter any area they see fit. In an article published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday, Clinton and Gates specifically lauded the Australian government's "ambitious plan" to acquire new air warfare destroyers and submarines that would complement the US Pacific fleet.

To facilitate American military activities, the US will have ongoing use of the base at Exmouth in Western Australia for the next 25 years. The most powerful communications facility in the southern hemisphere, it is used to direct naval and air operations in the western Pacific and Indian Ocean. Exmouth has been touted over recent days as the most likely site for new facilities to carry out surveillance of activity in space. The planned base is a clear response to the successful 2007 testing by China of an anti-satellite missile.

Australia also hosts the joint base at Pine Gap, which is

one of the most important satellite ground stations for the US military. It spies on communications throughout the Asian region, including China, and is used to target bombing operations in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On the international arena, the communiqué spelt out the Gillard government's support for long-term Australian involvement in the war in Afghanistan and the bellicose US stance against Iran ahead of new talks later this month. In effect, the Labor Party has committed Australia to being a participant in any US aggression against Iran, on the pretext that Iran is assembling nuclear weapons.

In line with the US diplomatic offensive, Australia expressed support for the “global role” of India and Japan's “key role in regional and international security”. In Australia's traditional sphere of influence, the South West Pacific, the communiqué declared support for greater US involvement and engagement with the military junta in Fiji, which has responded to Australian isolation by developing closer relations with Beijing.

On the economic front, both parties committed to seeking to enhance the influence of two regional bodies that include the US—APEC and the newly established East Asia Summit. Washington is seeking to use these institutions as a counter-balance to the increasing dependence of most Asian countries, including Australia, on the vast manufacturing industries operating in China.

In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* following the AUSMIN talks, Clinton dismissed the concerns in sections of the Australian ruling elite that the renewed US stress on the Asian region posed a threat to their economic interests.

Clinton declared it was important for Australians to recognise that even though “you increase your trade with China or your diplomatic exchanges with China, China has a long way to go in demonstrating its interest in being and its ability to become a responsible stakeholder”. There would be “a lot of tensions within China that have to be dealt with”, she stated, that would “impact the interests and well-being of its neighbours and beyond”.

Australia's burgeoning economic ties with China are nevertheless fuelling a debate in ruling class circles over the viability of the post-war alliance with the United

States.

Strategic analyst Hugh White, who has been at the forefront of advocating a partial shift away from the US, wrote in the *Age* that US-China rivalry presented “Australia with an impossible choice between our traditional alliance and our economic future”. Relations with the US were “rapidly losing strategic and political coherence”.

White insisted that the US had to treat China “as an equal”. Otherwise, rivalry “could become out of control, with serious danger of war”. Australia, he wrote, “would find itself forced to choose whether to follow the US into an increasingly intense strategic conflict with China, or abandon the alliance”.

Paul Dibb, by contrast, another former defence policy maker, endorsed the Gillard government's alignment with the US, and pointed to a confrontation with China over dominance in the region. In a bellicose statement, Dibb wrote in the *Australian* that the US and allied naval forces “will need to ensure that China respects international maritime law” in areas like the South China and East China Seas. “That may mean one day that China will have to be taught a military lesson at sea,” he declared.

Peter Hartcher, the international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, summed up the debate in an opinion column today. Quoting White's reference to a looming choice between the US and China, Hartcher concluded: “He's right. Australia made that choice yesterday. At the 25th annual Australia-US ministerial consultation (AUSMIN), Australia, in effect, chose sides.”

As far as the Labor government and the majority of the political and corporate establishment are concerned, the assertion of Australian imperialist interests still depends upon the closest alignment with the United States—even to the point of participating in a military clash and potential war with China.



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