

Clinton to pressure Australia to be firmer on China

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrives in Australia today for the annual Australia-US Ministerial Meeting (AUSMIN) on Monday. She and Defence Secretary Robert Gates are likely to deliver a blunt message to their Australian counterparts that Canberra's management of affairs in the South West Pacific is allowing growing Chinese influence in the region.

For Australia, the balancing act between its largest trading partner, China, and its longstanding standing military ally, the United States, is becoming increasingly fraught. In June, Kevin Rudd, who will take part in Monday's talks as foreign minister, was ousted as Labor Party leader and prime minister by Julia Gillard. Displeasure in Washington over his failure to unequivocally support the US, in the war in Afghanistan and in the Pacific, was undoubtedly a key factor in his removal.

Gillard has offered fulsome support for Washington from the outset, in particular committing Australian troops indefinitely to the occupation of Afghanistan. But she has come under sharp criticism in the Australian media over her ineffectual presence at last week's East Asia Summit in Hanoi and her subsequent trip in South East Asia.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial entitled "Missing in action in Vietnam" ridiculed Gillard's limited focus on gaining support for an asylum seeker centre in South East Asia. Caustically referring to her contribution to the strategic debate in Asia, it declared: "Forget about the rise of China, or the search for a policy balance that includes robustness with engagement of China. The danger she is worried about is boat people."

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell declared the key

issue at the AUSMIN meeting will be the strengthening of the US-Australia alliance for "maritime security" in the Pacific. At the East Asia Summit, Clinton reaffirmed that the US has a "national interest" in the South China Sea, through which major shipping lanes vital to China pass. She also backed Japan as its tensions with China flared at the summit over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea.

In Australia, the issue of "maritime security" is likely to focus on the South West Pacific and the failure of Canberra to curb growing Chinese influence in the small states of the region such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and East Timor. Ever since World War II, US strategic planners have treated the Pacific Ocean as "an American lake" and are deeply concerned that China is developing a blue water navy that may begin to intrude into this region.

Washington's determination not to simply leave the South West Pacific to Canberra's stewardship is particularly obvious in the case of Fiji. Since Commodore Frank Bainimarama seized power in a military coup in 2006, Australia and New Zealand have attempted to isolate Fiji, diplomatically and economically, to bring the junta to heel. As far as the US is concerned, however, the policy has been a manifest failure, allowing China to build a presence in Fiji through aid, investment projects and even the sale of arms.

In a keynote speech in Honolulu on October 28, Clinton effectively undercut the Australian and New Zealand isolation of Fiji, by announcing the opening of a USAID office in Fiji. "We are working through the Pacific Island Forum [based in Fiji] to support Pacific Island nations as they strive to really confront and solve the challenges they face, from climate change to freedom of navigation," she

declared.

Washington has largely ignored South Pacific for years, with USAID giving only \$3.6 million in loans to eight small Pacific nations in 2008, compared to \$206 million from China, mostly to Fiji. Now the US is starting to reassert a presence, with Clinton announcing an aid fund of \$21 million for climate change mitigation.

Richard Herr, an academic based at the Fiji National University, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that he saw the opening of the USAID office in Suva as a message to Australia and New Zealand. Referring to their attempts to isolate Fiji, he said: “It is certainly opening doors to all sorts of new opportunities for non-traditional players. These include China and Russia ... In other words, others are seeing opportunities in the Pacific Islands that are leading to all sorts of strange alliances. I think these are some of the things that have concerned the US government.”

Clinton’s decision to include the former Australian colony of PNG on her itinerary was another message to Canberra. While PNG is the largest of the small Pacific Island States, a US secretary of state has not visited Port Moresby for more than two decades. Chinese investment and aid in PNG is growing, with China’s state-owned Metallurgical Construction Corporation involved in opening the huge Ramu nickel and cobalt mine.

In Port Moresby, Clinton told PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare that the US was ready to assist in the development of country’s mineral resources, noting that the US Export-Import Bank has helped finance the ExxonMobil-led consortium that is developing a huge gas project.

The fact that President Barack Obama took off yesterday for his trip to the Asia Pacific’s “democracies”—India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea—and left Australia off the list may also be intended as a warning that Canberra risks being marginalised somewhat unless it falls into line. Earlier this year, Obama twice called off trips to Asia that included Australia on his itinerary—firstly, in the midst of the US health care debate, and secondly, because of the BP oil spill. Now he is on his way to Asia, but “democratic” Australia is not included.

Monday’s AUSMIN agenda will cover a range of issues, including China, exerting pressure on North Korea and Iran, and proposals for greater US military basing in Australia. As it reasserts its role in Asia, the Pentagon is looking for greater access to Australian military bases, the possible development of new joint facilities, and even a full US base near the northern city of Darwin, more joint military exercises and more frequent naval visits.

Any equivocation on Canberra’s part is likely to bring a cool response. An essay by Walter Lohman of the conservative US think tank, the Heritage Foundation, on November 3 underlined the concerns in Washington. The author was critical of Australian defence academic Hugh White who in a recent essay proposed that the US accommodate China, as a rising power, in a “Concert of Asia” involving a sharing of leadership.

Lohman declared: “The question is really not, as White has posited, whether the US is prepared to accept the Chinese as a global power but rather whether China is prepared to accept an order shaped by more than 60 years of American leadership. The critical task is the US working with its allies to convince the Chinese of this necessity.” He concluded: “The Australians should be natural American partners in this effort. The current angst there [displayed by White] is an indication that they need some convincing before joining America in making the case. They want to believe. Clinton and Gates should give them reason to.”

The joint declarations following the AUSMIN talks will no doubt be couched in suitably opaque diplomatic language. After all, neither the US nor Australia is about to make any sharp shift in the post-war alliance. Washington still relies on Australia for key military bases and as a loyal partner in wars, including in Afghanistan and Iraq. Canberra remains completely dependent on the US strategically and militarily. But if the Gillard government hesitates in fully backing US efforts to “convince” China of the necessity to accept US leadership in Asia, US political pressure on Canberra will undoubtedly intensify.



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