WikiLeaks cables cast fresh light on coup against former Australian PM Rudd

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The latest round of US diplomatic cables distributed by WikiLeaks has cast fresh light on the circumstances surrounding the anti-democratic Labor Party coup on June 23-24 that ousted Kevin Rudd as Australian prime minister. In 2008 and 2009, the US embassy issued an extraordinary series of scathing assessments of Rudd's performance, centring on his attitude to China. While the full story is yet to come out, the WSWS noted in the aftermath of the coup that "Washington's increasingly aggressive stance towards Beijing was undoubtedly a major factor in the recent political upheavals in Canberra."

The cables also shed light on the role being played by Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The prime beneficiary of the coup against Rudd, Gillard is functioning as nothing but a mouthpiece for the Obama administration. Lining up with right-wing forces in the US that have vilified WikiLeaks' editor Julian Assange, and called for his "assassination", the Australian prime minister has joined the fray by declaring "illegal", without a shred of evidence, the publication of the documents and by supporting US threats to prosecute Assange.

Excerpts from the latest cables have been published today by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers. They cover a two-year period in which the US was becoming increasingly preoccupied with countering the rise of China as a rival world power. Not yet published are cables from 2010, in the period immediately leading up to Rudd's ousting. But what has so far been revealed makes clear that as far as Washington was concerned, the Australian government's primary responsibility was to function as an obedient junior partner in the anti-China containment strategy, providing military and diplomatic support as demanded. Much of the US embassy's anger with Rudd derived from his various foreign policy initiatives that were not first devised in Washington, or at least vetted by American officials.

The leaked cables describe a series of "foreign policy mistakes". One is a December 2008 review of Rudd's first year in office, authored by US ambassador to Australia, Robert McCallum. The diplomat declared that Rudd's diplomatic "missteps" were due to his tendency to make "snap announcements without consulting other countries or within the Australian government".

The ambassador went on to point out that the Labor government's "significant blunders" began on February 5, 2008, when then foreign minister Stephen Smith (now defence minister) announced that Australia would not support further strategic "Quadrilateral" dialogue between Australia, the US, Japan and India.

The Quad had first met in May 2007 and held joint naval exercises, together with Singapore, in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. Unsurprisingly, Beijing was hostile to the four-nation alliance that was obviously geared towards limiting Chinese hegemony in East Asia. The Chinese government labelled the Quad an "Asian NATO". Stephen Smith's announcement that Australia was withdrawing from the group was issued at a joint press conference with his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi. Smith openly referred to China's concerns with the four-party alliance, but claimed that "the United States has indicated a similar disposition in recent weeks [i.e., not to continue the Quad] and I think that's been welcomed by all concerned".

The US ambassador had a very different understanding. The leaked cable states that the Labor government's announcement was made "without advance consultation" with Washington.

The document illustrates that just 10 weeks after the Labor Party was elected to office, Washington had significant doubts over whether Rudd could be regarded as a dependable ally in its drive to contain China's challenge to US dominance of the Pacific region.

In June 2008, the Australian prime minister proposed the creation of an Asia-Pacific Community, a broad forum to coordinate economic and strategic relations and mediate mounting tensions between the US and China. The American ambassador privately derided the initiative, saying it was launched "without advance consultation with either other countries (including South-East Asian nations, leading Singaporean officials to label the idea dead on arrival) or within the Australian government (including with his proposed special envoy to promote the concept, veteran diplomat Richard Woolcott)".

A previously published diplomatic cable revealed that in March 2009, Rudd met with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and promoted the Asia-Pacific Community as a means of preventing

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the emergence of a Chinese "Monroe Doctrine" in East Asia. The Australian prime minister also urged the use of "force" in the event that "everything goes wrong". The latest WikiLeaks' material indicates that well before this discussion there was considerable scepticism within the State Department about Rudd's stance on China.

Ambassador McCallum's December 2008 review included a sharp dismissal of Rudd's so-called Nuclear Non-Proliferations and Disarmament Commission, unveiled the previous June. This initiative, the US diplomat wrote, was "rolled out … during a photo-op heavy trip to Japan … His Japanese hosts were given insufficient advance notice and refused a request for a joint announcement". McCallum noted that Rudd did not consult any of the nuclear-armed states on the UN Security Council, and that Russia had lodged a formal protest. One of Rudd's staffers had provided the US embassy with a few hours' advance notice of the announcement, "but without details".

Other US cables reportedly refer to Rudd's "control freak" tendencies and "persistent criticism from senior civil servants, journalists and parliamentarians that Rudd is a micro-manager obsessed with managing the media cycle rather than engaging in collaborative decision-making".

In November 2009, US Charge d'Affaires Dan Clune wrote that Rudd dominated foreign policy decision making, "leaving his foreign minister to perform mundane, ceremonial duties and relegating the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to a backwater". The diplomatic agent concluded that Rudd's "haphazard, overly secretive decision-making process" would continue to generate foreign policy problems.

Since being installed as prime minister, Julia Gillard has emphasised her unalloyed commitment to the US alliance and pledged Australian participation in the neo-colonial war in Afghanistan for at least the next ten years. As prime minister, Rudd had resisted US government and military suggestions that more Australian forces be deployed to Central Asia. Washington's response to this may well be detailed in further leaked cables, yet to be made public.

In last month's AUSMIN talks with Hillary Clinton and other US officials, Gillard also invited a larger US military and intelligence force to be based in Australia. One of the most powerful American military chiefs, head of the US Pacific Command Admiral Bob Willard, is now touring the country to identify defence bases where American forces will be stationed. These bases, effectively new joint US-Australia facilities, will no doubt play a key role in any American confrontation with China.

By unconditionally tying Australian imperialism to US military strategy in East Asia, Gillard is following in the footsteps of Rudd's predecessor as Labor leader, Kim Beazley.

One of the leaked cables published today reveals that in 2006, Beazley, then leader of the opposition, met with ambassador McCallum and assured him that a future Labor government would fight alongside the US against China. Beazley opposed the Howard government's suggestion that Australia could stay out of a US-China war triggered by Taiwan. "In the event of a war between the United States and China, Australia would have absolutely no alternative but to line up militarily beside the US," the Labor leader declared. "Otherwise the alliance would be effectively dead and buried, something that Australia could never afford to see happen."

Assange has hit back against Gillard's highly provocative attack on WikiLeaks in an opinion piece published in the *Australian* today.

Titled, "Don't shoot messenger for revealing uncomfortable truths", Assange's article details the numerous threats directed against him. "Australians should observe with no pride the disgraceful pandering to these sentiments by Julia Gillard and her government," the journalist wrote. "The powers of the Australian government appear to be fully at the disposal of the US as to whether to cancel my Australian passport, or to spy on or harass WikiLeaks supporters. The Australian Attorney-General is doing everything he can to help a US investigation clearly directed at framing Australian citizens and shipping them to the US... The Gillard government is trying to shoot the messenger because it doesn't want the truth revealed, including information about its own diplomatic and political dealings."

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