

Australian PM Gillard visits the US—a loyal servant reporting for duty

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Julia Gillard will use her first visit to the US this week as Australian prime minister to reiterate her unalloyed commitment to the American alliance, the war in Afghanistan, and Washington's aggressive drive to contain Chinese influence in the Pacific.

In Washington and New York over eight days, Gillard is scheduled to meet President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke, World Bank President Robert Zoellick, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, CIA director Leon Panetta, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Amid this busy schedule, the Labor PM has also made time to have lunch with one of her most important taskmasters—media magnate Rupert Murdoch.

Gillard will address a joint sitting of Congress, becoming only the third Australian prime minister to do so. In office for less than nine months, Gillard will be the first foreign head of government to address the 112th Congress, after the 111th Congress jointly met just three times, for the leaders of Britain, Germany, and Mexico. The event, together with the considerable pomp and ceremony surrounding the entire trip, underscores Gillard's status as a valued asset of US imperialism.

Gillard came to power in June last year after heading a Labor Party coup against Kevin Rudd, orchestrated in close collaboration with the US embassy in Canberra. Thanks to the publication by WikiLeaks of leaked US diplomatic cables, it is now known that many of the leading factional and trade union apparatchiks who ousted Rudd had secretly worked with American officials. The former prime minister was targeted by Washington after he refused entreaties to step up the Australian commitment to the war in Afghanistan, and, even more importantly, resisted moves to incorporate Australia into Washington's anti-China cordon in the West Pacific. Immediately upon becoming prime minister, Gillard

committed to at least another decade of war in Afghanistan and made clear there would be no more unilateral Australian diplomatic initiatives aimed at mediating between Beijing and Washington.

During the course of her visit, Gillard will receive updates and instructions on key areas of US geo-strategic policy. Included will be reports on the deepening crisis facing occupying forces in the criminal US-led war in Afghanistan. "I anticipate that a major feature of my discussions with President Obama will be our shared mission in Afghanistan, as well as our defence cooperation in the modern age," she told the *Wall Street Journal*. Any request for more Australian troops or additional responsibilities for the existing occupation forces will doubtless be favourably received.

At the same time, the prime minister has declared she is "all ears", according to the *Australian*, "about the possibility of the US placing more military forces on Australian soil if it believes this is necessary in the light of the growing might of China and India". Gillard said she did not want to "pre-empt" any decision on the distribution of US troops in the Asia-Pacific, "But clearly we can be engaged and discussing what is possible in terms of collaboration with their defence force."

Any troop build-up in Australia would be directed primarily against Beijing. Gillard has acknowledged that China will be high on the agenda throughout her talks. "China's rise obviously is something the world is responding to," she said in her interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. "Obviously China's rise does also cause discussion of its rise as a military power, and those discussions will continue."

The Obama administration has mounted a strident counter-challenge to Beijing's growing economic, military, and diplomatic presence in the Pacific region, forging a network of strategic alliances aimed at maintaining US hegemony. Australia forms a significant

link in this network—as a vast land mass bordering both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, near some of the world’s most critical naval straits, and as a base for US military and intelligence forces.

On the return leg of her trip, the prime minister has scheduled a March 13 meeting in Hawaii with Admiral Robert Willard, commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), the branch of the military responsible for operations throughout the Pacific Ocean and East Asia, including China. Gillard’s office stated that the purpose of the meeting was to “discuss security issues in the Asia-Pacific”, but the real agenda will be to coordinate the Australian military’s place in Washington’s aggressive stance against Beijing.

The PM’s trip has again exposed the deep divisions in Australian ruling circles over where they should line up amid escalating US-China rivalry.

Foreign policy analyst Hugh White—who last September triggered a vitriolic public debate through an essay urging Washington to cede some power to Beijing in the Pacific—has pleaded with Gillard to change course. In an article in today’s *Australian Financial Review*, “China’s rise must change Gillard’s script”, White noted that “it is no exaggeration to say that Australia’s future depends on the future of the US-China relationship.” He warned: “If the US is not prepared to share leadership in Asia with China, it will have no alternative but to compete with it for primacy, or relinquish any substantial strategic role there. Either outcome would be disastrous for Australia.”

Washington is unwilling and unable to “share” leadership in any part of the world, with China or other rival powers. And, as far as Gillard is concerned, White’s entreaties will fall on deaf ears.

The South Pacific will likely be among the issues raised during Gillard’s talks on China. Australian imperialism has its own major economic and strategic interests within the region, but the discussions will no doubt centre on its assigned role in controlling the various small island states on behalf of US imperialism. Recently, Canberra has come under fire from elements within Washington’s foreign policy establishment for allowing China to increase its diplomatic and military influence in countries including East Timor, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji.

Hillary Clinton emphasised the strategic importance of the South Pacific in relation to China during her testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations last Wednesday. Referring to ExxonMobil’s \$10 billion liquid natural gas investment in Papua New Guinea, she bluntly declared: “Let’s put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-

good side of what we believe in, and let’s just talk, you know, straight *Realpolitik*. We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea, huge energy find ... ExxonMobil is producing it. China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it’s going to come in behind us, come in under us. They’re supporting the dictatorial regime that unfortunately is now in charge of Fiji. They have brought all of the leaders of these small Pacific nations to Beijing, wined them and dined them. I mean, if anybody thinks that our retreating on these issues is somehow going to be irrelevant to the maintenance of our leadership in a world where we are competing with China, that is a mistaken notion.”

On every issue, the Australian PM has been at pains to stress her agreement with US policy. She has insisted that she will not raise the US government’s pursuit of Julian Assange in any of her discussions, insisting that it “wouldn’t be appropriate”. The WikiLeaks’ founder and Australian citizen is currently facing extradition to Sweden on trumped up rape allegations, and has been threatened with prosecution under the Espionage Act, while numerous American political figures have demanded his assassination. Last week, before she left for Washington, Gillard denounced Assange and the US army intelligence analyst Bradley Manning, who now faces the death penalty for allegedly leaking the cables, insisting that neither man was a genuine whistleblower. Her remarks once again demonstrate the Labor government’s complicity in the Obama administration’s vicious vendetta against Assange and Manning.



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