

Australian PM tours North East Asia as mouthpiece for Washington

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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's tour of North East Asia over the past week has served as another indicator of sharpening regional tensions between China, on the one hand, and the US and its allies, on the other. While Gillard publicly emphasised trade and economic issues, the unmistakeable underlying message was that her government was an unswerving American ally and a reliable mouthpiece for Washington's demands on Beijing.

Gillard set the stage for her two-day visit to China—her first since ousting Kevin Rudd as party leader and prime minister last June—with stops in Japan and South Korea, and last month's trip to Washington. During the latter, she addressed the US Congress with a speech that advocated a more assertive American diplomatic and military presence in Asia. "Australia in the south, with South Korea and Japan to the north, form real Asia-Pacific partnerships with the United States," she declared.

Gillard's comments dovetailed with the Obama administration's aggressive intervention into Asia-Pacific forums over the past year and its efforts to contain China by strengthening strategic ties with its regional allies. The Australian PM's visits to Japan and South Korea formed part of this overall strategy.

After meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan last week, Gillard declared that both governments would "take forward... a vision for bilateral security and defence cooperation." The two leaders agreed to finalise an intelligence-sharing agreement and Gillard indicated that Canberra was open to Japanese troops training in Australia. The *Australian* newspaper reported last year that Japanese Defence Minister Toshimi Kitizawa was keen to draw on the Australian military's combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Central to Gillard's talks with Kan were the implications of the dramatic economic rise of China. The ruling elites in Australia and Japan, as well as South Korea, confront a similar dilemma: all three countries are heavily dependent economically on China, but rely strategically on their longstanding military alliances with the US. In this balancing

act between China and the US, Gillard, Kan and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak have all strongly backed Washington's line as it intensifies pressure on Beijing.

Gillard told the media: "Australia and Japan have a shared perspective in our region. We certainly are constructively engaged with China and we share the view that we want to see China become a full participant in the rules-based global order." Her comments were taken straight from the lexicon of American diplomacy: Washington is prepared to "constructively engage" with China and allow it a greater international role, but only in a global order that continues to be dominated by the US.

The Australian prime minister has certainly learnt to sing from Washington's song sheet. Every aspect of her tour was closely managed by her foreign policy advisers. She was careful not to openly offend Beijing and jeopardise Australia's huge minerals exports to China. But she also raised, in guarded diplomatic language, all the issues that Washington has been using to pressure Beijing—from so-called human rights to North Korea's nuclear program.

In South Korea, Gillard visited the demilitarised zone and exploited "an encounter" with a North Korean border guard—behind a pane of glass—to denounce the danger of the "repressive dictatorship" in Pyongyang. After the incident, artificially inflated with photographs in the media, she declared: "There was just this looming presence behind you, face against the glass... all of it is really bringing home to you the insecurity that the people of South Korea live with every day."

Amid these political theatrics, Gillard pressed China to take a tougher stance on its North Korean ally. "It's not in China's interest to have instability on the Korean peninsula. We have a shared interest in addressing the aggression of North Korea," she declared.

Over the past decade, Washington has repeatedly stirred up tensions over North Korea as a means of pressuring China. While concerned that Pyongyang's nuclear programs might

trigger an unwanted arms race in North East Asia, Beijing does not want the collapse of a regime that has been a useful ally on its borders with South Korea and Japan.

Gillard's remarks were even more pointed at a South Korean Anzac Day service to commemorate Australia's involvement in the Korean War. She characterised the conflict as a war "to defend the young [South Korean] republic against North Korean aggression" that was important "in fostering and keeping democracy." In fact, Australia joined a US-led military intervention to prop up a dictatorial regime in Seoul that had virtually no popular support. Gillard's comments will not have gone unnoticed in China, which fought on North Korea's side in what it maintains was a just war against US aggression.

Gillard allocated only two days of her tour to Beijing. She met with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao, pressed for a speedy conclusion to a free trade deal with China, and emphasised the strong economic ties between the two countries. China has become, in recent years, Australia's largest trading partner.

At the same time, Gillard followed Washington's line and ticked off the required points of contention. She told the press that she had raised the issue of "human rights" with Wen and Hu, indicated her concerns about North Korea, and pressed China to do more to force Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear programs. In her meeting with Hu, she repeated the US refrain that China must become more "transparent" about the expansion of its military capacities.

Commentator Rob Burgess caustically noted in the *Business Spectator* that Gillard's ignorance of foreign affairs was the mark of her "success" in Beijing. "Gillard's smooth sailing through Chinese diplomatic circles is guided by people who know about diplomacy, and about China, but those people are not her. So she follows the script, and does not make off-the-cuff complaints about the plight of oppressed minorities in China, or the shoddy treatment of Australian citizens within China's legal system. She reads the lines, and has made 'measured' remarks on both."

Gillard's buzz phrase throughout her trip was "engagement with China." She upbraided a journalist who asked how she intended to balance Australia's economic relationship with China with the Australia-US alliance, which was seeking "to contain China." In her rather awkward reply, she said: "Well our policy is not to contain, that is your wording of the question, it's certainly not my word, our policy is not to contain, our policy is to engage. To positively engage with China, and a prosperous China that's fully engaged in our region... is good for the region."

No one in the Chinese leadership will be fooled by Gillard's dissembling. She was politely received; Wen spoke positively about her "pragmatic" approach to the relationship between the two countries; and the state-owned media mostly echoed these sentiments. The state-run *Global Times*, however, pointed to the underlying tensions, warning: "If Australia keeps stating China's importance, yet reinforces the US-Australia alliance as its national strategy for the 21st Century, the Chinese public will feel uncomfortable."

The Australian media generally breathed a sigh of relief at the absence of any obvious Gillard blunders. Some wrote positively about her abandonment of Rudd's efforts to mediate between China and the US—an approach that alienated Washington and was a major factor in his ousting as prime minister.

Writing in the *Australian* today, former Howard adviser Andrew Shearer commented: "Gillard's visit could scarcely have marked a more sweeping renunciation of Rudd's China policy. Gone, apparently, is the romantic conceit that Australia can form a special relationship with the Middle Kingdom. Gone are the mixed messages and disappointed expectations on both sides... Her dealings with China will be reinforced, rather than impeded, if she continues to develop the US alliance and further strengthens defence and security links with Japan and South Korea."

Shearer's remarks only highlight the flawed premise on which Gillard's diplomacy rests: that it is possible to resolve the basic contradiction confronting Australian capitalism by fully backing Washington's aggressive stance and hoping that China will simply fall into line. For all the optimistic talk about "win-win" outcomes, antagonisms between the major powers are sharpening, not diminishing, as the global economic crisis deepens, driving competition for resources, markets and geo-strategic position towards conflict and war.



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