

Australian government aligns with Washington's anti-China stance in Asia

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The Australian Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard will utilise this weekend's meeting of Commonwealth heads (CHOGM) in Perth, Western Australia, to assert its unconditional alignment with the Obama administration, seeking to complement Washington's efforts to stem rising Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Last Monday, the *Australian*, the flagship publication of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, gave front page prominence to an exclusive pre-CHOGM interview with Gillard, in which she defined the essential elements of her government's embrace of US foreign policy, at times in highly sycophantic terms.

Amid the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s Depression, Gillard asserted that assessments of the decline of American global dominance were "exaggerated". Obama, who will make his first official visit to Australia next month en route to the East Asian Summit (EAS) in Indonesia, was, she insisted, "somebody of great strength and endurance" who would "work his way through".

In sharp contrast, on the eve of a European summit to address the intractable sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone, Gillard contemptuously declared "European countries are living beyond their means" and demanded they ceased "just seeking to muddle through".

Gillard declared her government's aim was "to renovate and renew" the US-Australia military alliance. Australia's ties with the US, she emphasised, were "absolutely pivotal to our foreign policy and strategic outlook". She particularly hailed the entry this year of the United States into the EAS—which was previously made up only of members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India.

The US, she told the *Australian*, was "reorientating" toward the Pacific and Asia. Its decision to join EAS was "an indication of the depth of that engagement".

Gillard's paeans to the Obama administration were clearly motivated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's sweeping outline of the global strategy of US imperialism in the latest edition of *Foreign Policy* magazine. In the article, she defined US foreign policy as standing at a "pivot point", for which the Obama administration had been preparing since it took office. For the past decade, the US had been preoccupied with Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the next decade, it would not. The full focus of "American statecraft" would be the Asia-Pacific region.

Outlining the economic imperatives at stake, Clinton wrote: "Open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade and access to cutting-edge technology. Our economic recovery at home will depend on exports and the ability of American firms to tap into the vast and growing consumer base of Asia."

China's markets, Clinton emphasised, had to be pried open to the US and other foreign companies, and Beijing had to allow its currency to appreciate. She implicitly demanded that China abandon its territorial claims in the South China Sea, curb its military expansion and bow down to American global hegemony.

The secretary of state spelt out the web of alliances—centring on Japan and South Korea and closer US ties with India and Indonesia—that Washington is forging to effectively block China from transforming its growing economic weight into political and military influence.

In the article, Australia was afforded elevated status in the Obama administration's vision of how the United States would continue to dominate the world economically, politically and militarily. The US-Australia alliance, Clinton wrote, would be expanded from "a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one, and indeed a global partnership".

Clinton implicitly referenced the role that the Australian government played, through Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd, in securing the agreement of Arab states for the imposition of a

United Nations “no-fly zone” against Libya. This provided the pretext for the devastating bombardment of the country and ultimately the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. One of the predatory and colonial motives of the war on Libya was to wrest control of its lucrative oil and gas resources away from Chinese and Russian corporations and deliver them to US and European concerns.

The implication of Clinton’s document is that Australia’s particular function is to complement the assertion of US interests in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and Africa against China.

Africa was the focus of a business summit in Perth this week that preceded CHOGM. Numerous African countries that were former British colonies belong to the Commonwealth. Major mining transnationals such as Rio Tinto and BHP-Billiton, as well as several Australian-based mining magnates, spoke openly of their plans to invest heavily into African resources in direct competition with Chinese companies. The federal Gillard Labor government and Western Australian Liberal state government have entered into closer diplomatic relations with a number of African states—an Australia-Nigeria Trade and Investment Council being the most prominent.

Preparations for a major expansion of US and Australian military ties are very advanced. Yesterday, the *Australian* highlighted Clinton’s declaration of an “Indo-Pacific” alliance. It reported that the key agreement likely to be announced during Obama’s visit was the establishment of new US bases and a boost to operations in Australia. The newspaper noted that “Australian defence officials have been working with the Americans on the US global force review, developing a strategy to deal largely with the growing military power of China”.

Possible agreements could include a US-controlled naval base in Western Australia, where US warships and submarines operating in the Indian Ocean could undergo resupply and maintenance “beyond the reach of Chinese missiles”. There will also be many more US training exercises in northern and north-western Australia, the location of vast mineral and natural gas reserves that are critical to China’s economic development. After addressing the Australian parliament in Canberra, Obama will visit the northern city of Darwin, one of the likely sites for an increased American military presence.

The agenda being pursued by the Labor government underscores, once again, the centrality of foreign policy, and specifically the US alliance, in the June 2010 political coup within the ALP that ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister and installed Gillard.

Rudd was equivocal about unconditionally aligning with the Obama administration against China—which has become Australia’s largest trading partner and a potential source of large foreign investment. Instead, he envisaged Australian capitalism playing the role of mediator between the two powers through an “Asia Pacific Community”. On the eve of the coup, Rudd and his defence minister were also wavering on the Australian commitment to the war in Afghanistan.

US diplomatic cables made available by WikiLeaks have revealed the depth of anger and hostility that existed in the Obama administration toward Rudd’s international diplomatic initiatives and his tentative attempts to strike a posture that was more independent from Washington. Obama pointedly cancelled visiting Australia twice when Rudd was prime minister.

US opposition to the direction of Australian foreign policy was communicated throughout the Labor government by US embassy “sources”, including Labor and trade union powerbrokers Mark Arbib, Bill Shorten and Paul Howes. These figures played the key role in bringing on the coup on June 23, 2010, behind the backs of not only the Australian population, but the vast majority of Labor Party members of parliament. In an event that had dictatorial overtones and has left a permanent stench of political illegitimacy surrounding Gillard, an elected prime minister was removed from office in the space of just 24 hours. Immediately upon taking power, Gillard declared her total commitment to the Afghan war and to the US alliance.

The consequences are now clear. The Labor government, on behalf of the Australian financial and corporate elite, with the backing of the conservative opposition and amid total silence from the Greens, has set a course for aggressive confrontation with China. Like the coup against Rudd, this is an agenda that is being implemented with next to no discussion or debate outside of ruling circles. It threatens to drag the people of Australia, the region and the world into a catastrophic war.



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