

# Obama lays down the challenge to China

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US President Barack Obama's speech yesterday to the Australian parliament signalled a deepening diplomatic, economic and strategic offensive to reassert US dominance in the Asia Pacific region against a rising China. The visit to Australia was part of Obama's focus on Asia that began with the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Honolulu last weekend and will continue tomorrow at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali.

Sending an unmistakable message to Beijing, Obama bluntly declared that "the United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay." Even as his administration is preparing huge spending cuts, he declared that the US military presence in Asia was "a top priority" and insisted: "Reductions in US defence spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific."

During a joint press conference on Wednesday with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Obama announced plans for the basing of US Marines in northern Australia, the greater American use of Australian ports and airbases, and enhanced joint training and exercises between the US and Australian militaries.

Speaking yesterday to Australian troops in the northern city of Darwin before flying to Bali, Obama made clear that the heightened presence was aimed at projecting US military power throughout South East Asia. "This region has some of the busiest sea lanes in the world which are critical to all our economies," he said. "In times of crisis... Darwin has been a hub," Obama declared, a reference to the city's function as a key base for the US military during World War II.

Obama's speech to the Australian parliament laid out

what he described as "a broader shift" in the focus of US policy away from the Middle East to Asia. Stronger military ties with Australia were just part of "a deliberate and strategic decision... to play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region." This "shift" toward confronting China reflects concerns in American ruling circles that President George W. Bush's preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan had allowed China to expand its influence in Asia at America's expense.

Washington claims that its aim is not to "contain China", but Obama's speech, which listed his administration's strengthening ties with one Asian government after another, can only lead to that conclusion. He highlighted the US alliance with Japan as "a cornerstone of regional security"; India's determination to "look east" and "play a larger role as an Asian power"; the deployment of US warships to Singapore; "increasing ship visits and training" in the Philippines and the US commitment to South Korea's security.

In advance of the East Asian Summit, Obama signalled that he would address the issues of "proliferation and security, including cooperation in the South China Sea." China is sharply opposed to any multilateral discussion of the competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. "The intervention of outside forces is not helpful for the settlement of the issue," China's assistant foreign minister Liu Zhenmin warned this week.

The Obama administration has heightened tensions over the South China Sea as a means of driving a wedge between China and members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The US has encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines to take a more

assertive stance, leading to naval incidents with China in disputed waters. Speaking in the Philippines where the Aquino administration has aggressively staked its claim in what it now calls the West Philippine Sea, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared this week: “Let me say, the United States will always be in the corner of the Philippines and we will stand and fight with you.”

Throughout the week, Obama repeatedly declared that China had to “play by the international rules” if it wanted to be a major power. These “rules,” however, are made in Washington to ensure a world order dominated by US imperialism, with other nations playing a subordinate role. Speaking to the Australian parliament, Obama declared that the US would continue to insist on China “upholding international norms and respecting the universal human rights of the Chinese people.”

“Human rights” is the ideological weapon that Obama intends to use as he steps up the confrontation with China. “History,” he declared demagogically, “is on the side of the free—free societies, free governments, free economies, free people. And the future belongs to those who stand for those ideals, in this region and around the world.”

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These remarks are utterly cynical. Even as Obama speaks of “free trade,” he is intent on imposing a trade deal on Asian countries—the Trans Pacific Partnership—that is entirely designed to meet American corporate interests. His references to “freedom of speech” and “freedom of assembly” ring particularly hollow as police in the US use brute force to break up the camps of the Occupy movement in city after city.

More fundamentally, “democracy” is the slogan under which US imperialism has pursued its predatory interests ever since US troops suppressed the Philippine revolution at the turn of the twentieth century at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Philippine lives. Between 1941 and 1945, the US fought the war in the Pacific against Japanese imperialism to ensure its domination over the region, especially China. When the

1949 Chinese revolution overthrew the US-backed dictator Chiang Kai Shek, the US waged a war to prop up the South Korean dictatorship and seek to destabilise the Maoist regime in Beijing. During the 1960s and 1970s, Washington conducted a second neo-colonial war in Vietnam in a bid to ensure US dominance and to “contain Communism” in Asia.

Obama hailed this record of imperialist barbarity and plunder, declaring: “From the bombing of Darwin to the liberation of Pacific Islands, from the rice paddies of Southeast Asia to a cold Korean Peninsula, generations of Americans have served here, and died here, so democracies could take root.” In reality, the US has backed one dictatorship after another in Asia, from the notorious Marcos regime in the Philippines to the Suharto junta in Indonesia, which came to power through the slaughter of at least half a million workers, peasants and Indonesian Communist Party members. The only true statement made by Obama is that successive Australian governments—Labor and Liberal—have backed US imperialism to the hilt.

No one should be taken in by Obama’s rhetoric about “human rights.” Obama, following his predecessor Bush, has maintained the neo-colonial occupation of Iraq, extended the war in Afghanistan into Pakistan, and, along with the European powers, bombed Libya to install a client regime in Tripoli. There is nothing benign about the build-up of the US military in the Asia Pacific region. US imperialism has no intention of peacefully allowing China or any other rival to challenge its domination of the Pacific, for which it fought 70 years ago.

Obama’s “shift” in foreign policy to the Asia Pacific does not presage a new era of “peace, prosperity and dignity for the peoples of the region and the world” but escalating tensions and confrontation between the US and China, threatening to plunge mankind into another military conflagration.



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