

# Obama heightens danger of war in Asia

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The significance of President Barack Obama's "shift" toward the Asia Pacific region has become evident in the course of the past week. On every front—diplomatic, economic and military—the Obama administration is aggressively confronting China, greatly heightening tensions within the region and every country of the region.

Obama's announcement of new basing arrangements for US Marines in northern Australia, along with greater access for American warships and warplanes, is part of a broader military build-up within the region to maintain American dominance and undercut China's growing influence. No longer able to wield the economic clout that it once did, US imperialism is recklessly deploying its military power in a confrontation with China that potentially will have far more disastrous consequences than the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Obama's declaration to the Australian parliament last Thursday that he had made "a deliberate and strategic decision" to refocus US foreign policy on the Asia Pacific reflects a process that has been underway for the past two years. Speaking in Hawaii a year ago, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton employed military jargon to sum up her task. She spoke of using "forward deployed diplomacy" to "sustain and strengthen America's leadership" by sending "our diplomatic assets... into every corner and every capital of the Asia Pacific region."

Obama is currently at the East Asia Forum in Bali where, despite China's objections, he intends to provocatively push America's "national interest" in the South China Sea. Under the guise of defending "freedom of navigation," the US has encouraged South East Asian nations to assert their rival claims to China

in these key strategic waterways—helping to expand the naval capacities of the Philippines and holding joint naval exercises with Vietnam. The result has been a series of naval incidents over the past year involving the Philippines, Vietnam and China that have dangerously elevated regional tensions.

There is nothing benign about Obama's diplomatic offensive. His administration's push to strengthen American alliances and build new ones throughout the Asia Pacific has already claimed political casualties. A major factor in the inner-Labor Party coup in June 2010 that removed Kevin Rudd and installed Julia Gillard as Australian prime minister was Washington's hostility to Rudd's attempts to act as a moderating go-between to ease US-China tensions.

Rudd, who has declared himself as "rock solid" on the US-Australian alliance, can in no sense be described as "anti-American." In managing the precarious balancing act between Australia's largest trading partner, China, and its long-term strategic ally, Rudd had proposed to establish a new regional body—the Asian Pacific Community—as a forum to prevent "a US-China strategic fault line through East Asia" from becoming a conflict that would be "a disaster for everyone."

Obama, however, wanted a faithful political servant in Canberra, not an independent conciliator. A series of WikiLeaks cables is testimony to the rising frustration in Washington as Rudd's diplomatic initiatives cut across Obama's attempts to intensify, not ease, the pressure on China. Rudd had already sunk the so-called Quadrilateral plan to strengthen military cooperation between the region's "four democracies"—the US, India, Japan and Australia—which China had denounced as "an Asian NATO" directed against itself.

The *Australian's* foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, observed last weekend that Obama had cancelled two trips to Australia—the second leading to the “cancellation of Kevin Rudd’s prime ministership.” While he put the connection down to “political inattention” on Obama’s part, the coup against Rudd—as Sheridan knows only too well—was carried out by a handful Labor and union figures with the closest connections in Washington. At the very least, Obama knew of, and gave his tacit approval for, Rudd’s ousting—calling off a planned visit that would have landed him in Canberra just days before Rudd’s removal.

Gillard’s fawning subservience was on display throughout Obama’s 24-hour visit to Australia last week, as were the continuing tensions with Rudd, now Australia’s foreign minister. Just days before Obama arrived, Gillard announced that she intended to overturn a ban imposed by Rudd on the sale of Australian uranium ore to India. Gillard did not inform Rudd of the move in advance, even though he was about to head off for India. The decision to sell uranium to India, which undoubtedly took place at Obama’s request, is not only a boon for mining companies, but removes an obstacle to closer Australia-India military relations, and Obama’s efforts to resurrect the Quadrilateral in some form.

The ruthlessness with which Rudd was ousted underlines what is at stake in Obama’s offensive against China. Throughout the region, the ruling elites are wrestling with the same dilemma as their Australian counterparts—how to balance their burgeoning economic ties with China against the strident demands from the world’s dominant military power to side with it on every issue, from trade to military basing and strategic planning. Amid the deepening global economic crisis, Washington will not tolerate any, even limited, independence on the part of allies like Australia, as it seeks to shore up American military and economic dominance across the Indo-Pacific region.

Indonesia’s foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, who is hosting the East Asia Summit today, expressed the fears held in Jakarta when he criticised the decision to

station US Marines in Darwin, just to the south of the Indonesian archipelago. Natalegawa warned that China would most likely react by strengthening its own military capabilities, leading to “a vicious circle of tension and mistrust in the region... the challenge for all of us is to make sure that doesn’t escalate out of control.”

By opening up Australian military bases, ports and airfield to US troops, warplanes and warships, the Gillard government has put Australia and the Australian working class on the front line of any conflict between the US and China. The very real danger is that US imperialism’s provocative diplomatic skirmishing will lead to clashes in a region filled with dangerous flashpoints—from the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan to the contested borders between India and China.

Only the international working class can put an end to scourges of militarism and war. That requires a unified struggle of workers in Asia, America and internationally to abolish the profit system and its division of the world into rival capitalist nation states that has already produced two devastating world wars over the past century.

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