

Obama's visit prompts rancorous Australian foreign policy debate

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US President Obama's trip to Canberra last month has reignited the debate in ruling circles over the alignment of Australian foreign policy as the US intensifies its confrontation with China in the Asia Pacific region. The announcement during the visit that the US military will have greater access to bases in northern and western Australia, putting the country on the frontline of this intensifying rivalry, has markedly sharpened the disputes.

The Labor government's alignment with Washington's aggressive moves—personified in Prime Minister Julia Gillard's obvious fawning over Obama—prompted commentary across the political spectrum, from former Liberal opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull to ex-Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating and former Labor opposition leader Mark Latham. Their warnings about the danger of Australian capitalism being caught up in US machinations against China are driven by fears in corporate circles that alienating Beijing risks retaliation against Australian economic interests.

Turnbull, a wealthy former investment banker, voiced these concerns in an address to Asialink on November 28. While the Australian political and media establishment uncritically welcomed Obama's aggressive turn to Asia, Turnbull argued that Canberra had to maintain a balance between the US, its longstanding strategic ally, and China, its most important economic partner. "We have vastly more to gain than to lose from the rise of China, India and the rest of emerging Asia," he said.

"It suits President Obama's domestic agenda to be seen to muscle up to China," Turnbull declared, then added: "But an Australian government needs to be careful not to allow a doe-eyed fascination with the leader of the free world to distract from the reality that our national interest requires us truly (and not just rhetorically) to maintain both an ally in Washington and a good friend in Beijing."

Turnbull in no way suggested that Australia break its military alliance with the US, but was critical of "talk of containment"—that is, Washington's efforts to forge strategic alliances throughout Asia against China. "It makes no sense for America, or Australia, to base long-term strategic policy on the proposition that we are on an inevitable collision course with a militarily aggressive China," he said.

Turnbull bluntly disagreed with "the underlying premise of the 2009 Australian White Paper that we should base our defence planning and procurement on the contingency of a naval war with China in the

South China Sea," saying: "Prejudice or wishful thinking is not a substitute for coolly rational analysis."

Over the past two years, the Obama administration has deliberately heightened tensions in the South China Sea by encouraging South East Asian countries to press their rival maritime claims against China. Beijing is well aware that US naval strategy is based on controlling shipping routes through South East Asia and thus having the ability to choke off crucial energy supplies from the Middle East and Africa in the event of conflict.

As far as Turnbull is concerned, for Canberra to sign up to this strategy is both unnecessary and economically suicidal. "The best and most realistic strategic outcome for East Asia must be one in which the powers are in balance, with each side effectively able to deny the domination of the other—a scenario which Hugh White has written about extensively in the recent past," he explained.

The reference to strategic analyst Hugh White was deliberate and pointed. White's essay last year entitled "Power Shift: Australia's future between Washington and Beijing" provoked a storm of opposition for suggesting that the US had to make concessions to China to establish a "Concert of Asia", a deal between the major regional powers to prevent confrontation and war. A diatribe by Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of Murdoch's *Australian*, branded the essay as "the single, stupidest strategic document ever prepared in Australian history." (See: "Australia: US-China rivalry provokes heated debate")

While Turnbull, who still harbours leadership ambitions, was relatively guarded in his remarks, former Prime Minister Keating felt no such restraints. In an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program on November 23, he made clear that he welcomed the US presence in the region and took no exception to the stationing of US Marines in northern Australia. But he was highly critical of the way in which Obama had used the Australian parliament as a platform laying down a US challenge to China.

"What we saw this week was the president in Australia saying... 'We're getting out of the Middle East. We're renewing our interest in the Asia-Pacific and we're sticking it to China'," Keating said. "In a sense we've got brought into it, perhaps verbalised [police putting words in a witness's mouth] to be part of what looks like the stringing out of a containment policy... I think the Americans are quite ruthless about this. Of course that is what they were up to."

Keating openly pointed to the Australian economic interests at stake, declaring that China was where “much of our economic bread is buttered.” Warning that relations with China had already been damaged, he said: “Frankly it’s going to be very hard for senior Australian government ministers to appear in China anytime soon.”

What most troubled Keating was the danger of war. He repeatedly returned to the point that US attempts to contain a rising China paralleled the rising tensions in Europe a century ago as Britain, France and Russia sought to counter Germany. “We fought two world wars over the status of Germany. Two! We don’t want to be fighting one over the status of China,” he said.

Keating dismissed the notion that the close interlocking of the US and Chinese economies would lessen the danger. “[As for] the idea that trade will sort of dampen everything down, you should remember that Germany was at the end of the 19th Century to the world what China is today: the great major manufacturer. This didn’t stop the First World War.”

Like Turnbull and White, Keating called for a concert of powers and warned against “a bipolar structure, some sort of metal-ringing fence around China.” To view the rise of China, he said, as “some way illegitimate, that they are a commercial competitor that has to be strategically watched” would be repeating “the same mistakes that the British, the French and the Germans made and the Russians made at the end of the 19th Century.”

Keating and Turnbull are stating what is obvious to anyone who is politically literate: that the Obama administration’s reckless policy of forging military alliances in Asia against China is driving the region and the world towards war. The political establishment would clearly prefer no discussion, for fear that it could prompt opposition among workers and youth to militarism and war. Thus following Obama’s visit, the media has, for the most part, been silent on the issue.

That is also why Greg Sheridan wrote a vicious comment entitled “Malcolm Turnbull all at sea on China” in last weekend’s *Australian*, declaring that his speeches on China “help explain why he was such a disastrous Liberal leader and why he should never be considered for the leadership again.” The only purpose of the column, which was long on insult and short on argument, was to intimidate Turnbull and anyone else into silence.

Sheridan, who is well-connected in the US, clearly felt he had the weight of the political and military establishment behind him. On one side, he declared, we have the Australian mainstream “buttressed by our great policy departments of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister and Cabinet, buttressed also by the vast majority of serious strategic analysts in Australia and embraced both by the Australian people and on a bipartisan basis politically.” On the other side, he added, “we have White, Latham and Turnbull. I think I go with the Australian mainstream.”

With such firepower behind him, Sheridan did not feel the need for coherent analysis. He simply repeated the lies he had learnt by rote in Washington—the US was not seeking to contain China; the US was a beacon for democracy in Asia; China’s military expansion was

menacing; its belligerence was shown by the clashes in the South China Sea. He kept silent, for obvious reasons, on the most telling point that he could have made about his opponents’ arguments: that a “Concert of Asia” is a utopian dream amid a deepening global economic crisis and sharpening rivalries, so Australian capitalism choose sides with the US, regardless of the economic cost and danger of war.

Sheridan’s inclusion of Mark Latham is a reference to the former Labor leader’s column in the business newspaper, the *Australian Financial Review*, last Friday. Latham declared that Gillard had made “a horrific mistake, one that threatens Australia’s place in the world for decades to come” by allowing herself to be “roped in as a supporter of this erratic [US] strategy” towards China. The comment appeared on the eve of last weekend’s Labor Party national conference, and an exasperated Latham noted that no parliamentarian or factional leader was challenging Gillard’s stance. A member of the Right faction, Latham even appealed to “the Left faction to reassert its commitment to an independent foreign policy.”

However, as Latham himself predicted, the Gillard government’s decision to sign up to Obama’s aggressive new anti-China stance and its dangerous implications were not raised by anyone at the conference—left, right or centre. The silence was not accidental. The political coup that ousted Kevin Rudd and installed Gillard last year was in large part a result of the Obama administration’s hostility to Rudd’s proposal for a regional body akin to a “Concert of Asia”. No one objected to Rudd’s removal, signalling that the party has a whole understood that the line from Washington has to be followed to the letter.

White, Turnbull, Keating and Latham are by no stretch of the imagination opponents of imperialism or war, nor do they in any way represent the interests of the working class. Rather they represent a dissident, rather beleaguered faction of the political establishment that regards support for Obama’s policy as ruinous for Australian capitalism. The very rancour and bitterness of this debate in ruling circles is a symptom of the huge interests at stake and the immediacy of the dangers involved.

The reckless adventurism of US imperialism has already lead to a series of wars over the past decade—in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya—with disastrous results for workers and youth internationally. The lesson that must be drawn for the emerging conflict between the US and China is that the working class must develop its own independent political movement against militarism and war that is directed at the source of these evils—the profit system itself. The slide towards a global catastrophe can only be prevented on the basis of the internationalist and socialist program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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