

Australian foreign minister rebuked in Beijing over US military deal

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Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr this week made his first official visit to China, holding several meetings with senior government and military figures in Beijing on May 13-15. Chinese officials used the opportunity to sharply criticise Australia for its recent military agreement with the US.

The Labor government has agreed that 2,500 Marines will be stationed in northern Australia, US ships and long-range bombers will be provided greater access to Australian bases, and unmanned American drones will later be positioned on Australia's Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Carr had previously suggested that these developments were of little concern to the Chinese government.

During a press conference held soon after he landed in Shanghai last Saturday, the foreign minister confidently declared that Beijing “would view the rotating deployment of US Marines ... as being a natural outgrowth, a natural fleshing out of the ANZUS Treaty.” He said there had been a “relatively muted response” in China to the Marine announcement during US President Barack Obama's visit to Australia last November.

Carr struck a very different note after his discussions with Vice Premier Li Keqiang, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, and the deputy chief of the People's Liberation Army general staff, Lieutenant General Wei Fenghe. “The most objective way of saying it is my three Chinese partners invited me to talk about enhanced Australian defence cooperation with the United States,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “I think their view can be expressed that the time for Cold War alliances have long since past.”

Journalists in Beijing reported on the tensions in less

diplomatic terms. The London *Telegraph* described Carr being “grilled” by Chinese officials. An article in the *Australian* reported: “Like a bear with a sore head, Beijing has cast around for someone to provide a therapeutic target at which to take a swipe, in lieu of the Americans, who are too important and too powerful themselves. Enter the foreign minister of Australia, the US's close ally, on his first official visit to China... Carr has had to endure an unusually focused critique of Australia's decision of six months ago to host training for up to 2,500 US marines. There is also discussion about the prospect of Australia's Cocos Islands being used by unmanned American drone aircraft.”

In his Beijing discussions, Carr raised the imprisonment in China of three Australian citizens—Stern Hu, Matthew Ng, Charlotte Chou—on contested allegations of corporate corruption, but was given short shrift. Chinese officials said that as they did not recognise dual nationality, they did not recognise the Australian citizenship of the three individuals, and would not discuss their cases.

The Australian foreign minister attempted to strike an upbeat note on moves towards an Australia-China free trade agreement, reporting that progress was being made. Negotiations have been dragging on for years, however, and there is no sign of an imminent resolution. There are growing concerns in Australian corporate circles that lucrative opportunities in China are being lost to rival powers. Beijing has already signed a free trade agreement with New Zealand and has recently launched negotiations for one with both South Korea and Japan, potentially establishing an enormous trade bloc that excludes Australia.

Aside from shipping vast quantities of unprocessed minerals, Australian export and investment activity in

China remains relatively small. Before the discussions in Beijing, Carr said that he would urge the Chinese government to “free up” its finance sector, opening up more opportunities for Australian banks, and added that “we’d be very encouraged if the Chinese would lift the upper limit on Australian ownership of companies they’ve acquired in China.” No progress on any of these matters was announced during Carr’s visit.

The terse diplomatic discussions have underscored the tensions in East Asia that are being generated by the Obama administration’s provocative “pivot” to the region. The US has announced a strategic focus on the Asia-Pacific, aimed at countering China’s growing regional influence. The US-Australia military deal is just one of the Obama administration’s many military and diplomatic initiatives directed against China. In South-East Asia, for example, Washington has cultivated ties with Vietnam and the Philippines and encouraged both countries to step up their aggressive border claims in the disputed South China Sea, triggering more frequent confrontations, including a recent Sino-Philippine naval standoff over a small group of islands.

China’s retaliatory imposition of trade sanctions on the Philippines will have raised concerns in Canberra over the prospect of Beijing one day restricting Australian mining exports over the ANZUS military manoeuvres.

The Australian ruling elite confronts an intractable dilemma—China is now Australia’s most important trading partner, but ever since World War II the US has been the country’s critical diplomatic and military ally. Confronting the threat of a US-China military conflict that would prove devastating for the interests of Australian capitalism, the political, military, and foreign policy establishment in Canberra is wracked by divisions over how to respond.

These divisions were evident in the media’s reaction to Carr’s China visit.

The Murdoch-published *Australian* yesterday featured an editorial titled “China will respect our US bond.” The newspaper insisted that “notwithstanding our vital economic relationship with China ... Australia must resist any hint of obsequiousness towards the rising Asian giant.” Beating its chest, the *Australian* denounced Beijing’s “impertinence” for questioning the Marine base

agreement, concluding that Obama’s strategic focus on East Asia “is something Australia is right to embrace, no matter the hackles that might be raised in Beijing.”

Also yesterday, the *Melbourne Age* published a very different editorial that effectively urged Australian imperialism to distance itself from Washington. It bluntly insisted that “Australia should consider its role in a US military build-up.” Recognising the “shared democratic values” between the US and Australia, the newspaper continued, “is not the same as saying that Australia’s national interest lies in closer military integration with the US as it shifts its global projection of power away from the Middle East to an emphasis on the Asia-Pacific.”

The Marine deployment, the *Age* added, “can only be seen in Beijing as a provocation”, and Carr’s explanations for the move “can only seem like weasel words.” The Gillard government, the editorial complained, has not been inclined to “act independently as a middle-ranking power in the Asia-Pacific region, [instead] preferring Australia’s historically comfortable role of doing the bidding of a powerful protector.”

This assessment provoked a furious editorial response in the *Australian* today. It denounced the *Age* for “anti-American, Sinophilic posturing we would have expected from university protesters in the 1970s; not the sober statement of a sensible newspaper.”

Such frenzied language has become a commonplace reaction of the Murdoch press to any perceived deviation from Australian capitalism’s alliance with US. Still dominant layers within the ruling elite, represented by the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, see no alternative to Canberra backing Washington to the hilt against China, regardless of the potentially catastrophic consequences.



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