Australian government backs US campaign against Syria

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The Australian Labor government has again demonstrated its role in international affairs as the loyal point man for Washington, with the announcement on Tuesday that two Syrian diplomats, including the chargé d'affaires, had 72 hours to leave the country.

The expulsions were part of a co-ordinated campaign by the US and its allies to whip up public outrage over the Houla massacre so as to create the climate for further sanctions on Syria and military intervention. Foreign Minister Bob Carr joined the international chorus, branding the deaths as "a hideous and brutal crime" that had "appalled" Australians.

Carr's indignant statements are utterly cynical. What exactly happened in Houla is still the subject of contention. Moreover, the one-sided focus on the murder of men, women and children in Houla is to obscure the fact that atrocities are taking place on both sides in a de facto civil war that is being fuelled by the Western powers and their proxies.

Echoing the Obama administration, Carr blamed Russia and China for blocking the UN's endorsement of tougher action. Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), he declared that he found it "acutely disappointing" that, unlike the intervention in Libya, "you've got resistance from two nations that enjoy veto power" in the UN Security Council.

Carr called "for an international response [that] could include referrals to the International Criminal Court and imposing UN sanctions." He pointed to the political and logistical difficulties of a military intervention along the lines of Libya, but did not rule it out. Carr

made no mention of the military support already being funnelled via Turkey and the Gulf states to militia opposed to the regime of President Bashir Assad.

The expulsion of Syrian diplomats from Australia preceded similar actions in other countries, including the US, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Canada.

Australian governments have played an important role in mustering political support for previous US-led military interventions. The Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard, backed by the Labor opposition, committed Australian troops to the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In the latter case, Canberra's involvement in the bogus "coalition of the willing" was vital to the Bush administration's claim to have international support.

Last year, then Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd was in the forefront of campaigning for air strikes against the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi. On March 6, he called on the UN Security Council to authorise NATO to impose "a no-fly zone" on the country using the threat to civilians in the city of Benghazi as a pretext.

It soon became clear that Rudd was acting as a mouthpiece of the Obama administration. Less than two weeks later, the US and European campaign had built for a UN Security Council resolution authorising NATO intervention. The "no-fly zone" was never about "protecting civilians", but was the pretext for a full-scale air war to back opposition militias in the ousting of Gaddafi.

At the time, Carr—then a retired New South Wales

state premier—was mildly critical of the NATO war on Libya. In May last year, Carr declared: "The hasty, ill-thought-out nature of the Western commitment to Libya is becoming clearer by the day. And why Australia chose to get caught up in it… well, that does not stand analysis."

Carr was installed as foreign minister in March this year, after Rudd resigned from the position, challenged for the Labor leadership and lost. In a bid to shore up her unstable minority government, Gillard plucked Carr from political retirement, organised a seat for him in the Senate, and made him foreign minister.

Just days after his appointment, Carr declared that he had been "completely wrong" on Libya. The about face underscores the cynicism of Carr's latest statements on Syria. The new foreign minister also swallowed his words on Iran, telling the ABC: "I think I've been persuaded out of the view that the [UN, US and European] sanctions are wrong. The more recent evidence is that the sanctions are working."

Carr has also shelved his previous criticisms of Gillard's deal with Obama last November to station US Marines in Darwin and open Australian naval and air bases to US forces.

In opposing the Obama's confrontational stance towards China, Carr wrote: "The more thoughtful American policy would be to accept a growing Chinese role in the Pacific and to negotiate the terms and conditions that surround it." Carr's comments go the heart of the dilemma confronting the Australian capitalist class that is heavily dependent economically on exports to China, but is reliant strategically on the backing of its longstanding alliance with the US. Indeed, Canberra's slavish support for US wars in the Middle East is the necessary quid pro quo for Washington's backing for Australia's interventions in the Pacific.

While a staunch defender of the US alliance, Rudd alienated the Obama administration by suggesting, like Carr had done, that the US reach an accommodation with China. Rudd's ouster in June 2010 was carried out with the blessing, if not active involvement, of the White House by a handful of faction leaders with close connections to Washington. It is not surprising that Carr has not repeated his criticisms of Obama's so-called pivot to Asia.

Having criticised the NATO war on Libya, Carr is now in the forefront of the US-led campaign against Syria. His political back-flips after being appointed foreign minister are another demonstration of the servile character of the Gillard government as a whole. On Syria, as on every other issue, the Labor government is deeply enmeshed in, and therefore politically responsible for, the criminal enterprises of US imperialism.