

US-Australian ministerial talks boost military ties

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Yesterday's AUSMIN talks in the Western Australian state capital of Perth, involving the top US and Australian foreign and defence officials, confirm that the second-term Obama administration is pressing ahead with its diplomatic and strategic offensive throughout Asia to undermine China as a potential rival.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton played down the implications for China and declared: "The Pacific is big enough for all of us." At the same time, however, she reiterated Washington's insistence that Beijing abide by the existing international "rules-based" system—that is, one based on continued American global dominance and US-dictated "rules."

The visit by Clinton and US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta is the first leg of a trip through South East Asia, alongside President Obama, taking in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. In each country, Obama is seeking to strengthen US ties at China's expense. In Cambodia, Obama and his top officials will attend the East Asia Summit, at which the US is likely to again stoke the territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and South East Asian nations. (See: "Obama intensifies 'pivot' to Asia").

The Australian Labor government has slavishly backed Obama's so-called pivot to the Asia-Pacific region. During the president's visit to Australia last November, Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced an agreement to station US Marines in northern Australia and provide access to Australian military bases for US warships and warplanes.

Amid criticism from Washington over cuts to Australian defence spending, Gillard flew to Perth to meet Clinton to assure the US that Australia's "core" military capacities

had not been harmed. According to the *West Australian*, Gillard said the AUSMIN talks would focus on defence cooperation between the two countries and indicated that Australian defence spending would be raised in the future.

The joint AUSMIN communiqué issued yesterday reaffirmed the Gillard government's support for Obama's aggressive foreign policy across the globe—from its threats against Iran and Syria, to US interventions in the disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea. The document reaffirmed last year's agreement, while noting that US Marines had begun their "rotation" through Darwin in northern Australia, and pointing to "increased rotations of US aircraft through northern Australia."

The decision to hold the AUSMIN talks in Perth has a strategic significance. In a speech at the University of Western Australia, Clinton declared that the city was situated "at a very strategic part of our planet, Australia's gateway to the vibrant trade and energy routes that connect the Indian Ocean and the Pacific."

Pentagon strategists have increasingly focussed on ensuring US dominance in what it terms the "Indo-Pacific" region and over the key shipping routes across the Indian Ocean and through South East Asia—routes on which China relies to import vital energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. As part of Obama's pivot, the US has strengthened its strategic partnerships, especially with India, as a counterbalance to China across the region.

In her speech, Clinton declared that the US had "made it a strategic priority to support India's Look East policy"—that is, an economic and military orientation to South East Asia. She called on the Australian government to organise joint naval exercises with India in the future.

On the eve of Obama's visit last year, the Gillard government overturned a ban on uranium sales to India, opening the door for closer bilateral ties. These were further cemented by Gillard's trip to India last month.

Obama's moves against China have gone under the hypocritical banner of uniting the "democracies" of Asia against their authoritarian neighbour. Clinton again hailed India as "the world's largest democracy" and called on China to open up its "society and political system... to give the Chinese people the opportunities we in the United States and Australia are lucky to take for granted."

As part of its Indian Ocean strategy, the US has been seeking access to the Stirling naval base near Perth. A recent Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) study commissioned by the Pentagon suggested that Stirling become the base for an entire US aircraft carrier battle group. Such an escalation of the US military presence would certainly provoke criticism from Beijing.

Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith was at pains to insist that, despite its mention in the AUSMIN communiqué, any US use of the Stirling base would be years away. He again denied that US-Australian defence ties were aimed at "containing" China. He nevertheless added that "the enhanced importance of Stirling and its utility is to me something that will occur as surely as night follows day."

The AUSMIN partners announced an agreement to establish a joint military facility with powerful C-band radar and a space telescope in Western Australia. The pretext for the sophisticated new station was to observe space debris in the southern hemisphere. But, as one US official told AFP, it will also greatly enhance the Pentagon's ability to track China's missile tests and satellites.

Canberra's concern to disguise the US-Australian military build-up stems from real fears in Australian corporate circles that China, now the country's largest trading partner, will retaliate economically. Every effort is being made by the Gillard government to publically pretend that it has not signed up to a reckless American policy of "containing" China. "None of this is aimed at any one country," Smith disingenuously told the media.

Nevertheless, there is continuing public criticism of the

Gillard government's unconditional alignment with Washington. Commenting in the *Age* on Tuesday, strategic analyst Hugh White dismissed the "delusion" that the US is not engaged in a policy of containment and called on Obama to seek an accommodation with China. "Increasing strategic competition between the world's two strongest states is not in anyone's interest, but that doesn't mean it won't keep happening," he warned.

In a lecture at the Australian National University on Monday, former Australian ambassador to China Stephen Fitzgerald sounded a similar warning, declaring that "Australia has made itself a military accessory to Washington's re-invigorated alliance system in the Pacific, which is about buttressing Washington's position vis-à-vis Beijing, providing support for its rivalry and contest with Beijing in Asia and the Pacific, and collateral for a policy of containment of China."

While these comments reflect concerns in Australian ruling circles, they point to the very real dangers confronting the working class. Amid the worsening global economic crisis, the US is desperately seeking to offset its economic decline and maintain international dominance through military force. By siding with the US against China, the Gillard government has ensured that the Australian population will be dragged into any conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers, and Australian military bases and cities such as Perth and Darwin will become potential targets.



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