

Australian government critics express fears of an Asian war

Peter Symonds
7 November 2012

Just a week after the Australian government released its White Paper on “Australia in the Asian Century,” criticisms have emerged that reflect deep concerns in ruling circles over the potential for confrontation and conflict within the region between China and the US.

In a lecture on Monday night, Richard Woolcott, veteran Australian diplomat and former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, highlighted the failure of the White Paper to address “the urgent need to determine a more appropriate balance in relations with the US and China, the emerging superpower.”

Australian capitalism confronts a fundamental contradiction posed by its economic dependence on China on the one hand, and its longstanding strategic alliance with the US, on the other. The Obama administration’s aggressive diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China has been fully backed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, compounding the dilemma. Yet the White Paper dismissed the prospect of conflict between the US and China, ignored the worsening global economic crisis, and assumed the inexorable economic rise of Asia, especially China, for decades.

Expressing his disappointment, Woolcott declared that he had hoped that the White Paper would “send an unambiguous signal... that, while we have some different attitudes from China and are in an alliance with the US, we welcome the rise of China and oppose policies directed at the ‘containment’ of China.”

Hinting of war, the ex-diplomat warned that “the rise of China, if mismanaged, could lead to instability.” He added: “There is a danger that adversarial attitudes towards China could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. While China can be expected to resist US ‘hegemony’

over the Asian region, it welcomes a continuing constructive US involvement in Asia.”

Woolcott’s hopes for easing tensions between the US and China, however, are no more realistic than the views expressed in the White Paper. For two decades, successive US administrations have recklessly pursued a strategy of using military might to offset America’s long-term economic decline, plunging into a series of aggressive wars. Now the US is “refocussing” on the Asia Pacific region and China.

While not openly criticising the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia, Woolcott is clearly uneasy about close Australian involvement. He questioned Australia’s ANZUS military alliance with the US, declaring that it “should not be regarded as an absolute guarantee of American military support, which it is not, or as a political sacred cow.” Woolcott noted that “an increasing number of Australians” regard the alliance as responsible for Australian involvement in “three unsuccessful wars—Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.”

There is, however, bipartisan support within the Australian political establishment for the ANZUS alliance and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are regarded as necessary to ensure continued US backing for Australian interests globally, and especially within the immediate region of the South West Pacific. US support was vital for Canberra’s neo-colonial operations in East Timor and Solomon Islands.

Responding to media questions about Woolcott’s remarks, Prime Minister Gillard dismissed his criticism, declaring that the government did not support or engage in “a containment policy” and welcoming “China’s rise into the global rules-based system.” In fact, the existing

international system of economic and strategic relations is one based on rules devised by Washington to assure its continued global hegemony.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday revealed a distinct nervousness in the Gillard government about its unambiguous commitment to Obama's "pivot." A year ago, President Obama visited Canberra and in a keynote speech to the Australian parliament laid out what he described as "a broader shift" to Asia "to play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region." He and Gillard announced an agreement to station 2,500 US Marines in the northern city of Darwin and for US military access to Australian naval and air bases.

However, a US official told the *Herald* that the Australian government had gotten "cold feet" at the last minute, saying: "As you get closer, you realise the momentous nature of it [the decision]." While Obama did not explicitly threaten to cancel the visit, it was made clear that "the President was not going to Australia to announce some temporary measure or 250 Marines... This was very important to the White House."

These remarks shed further light on the ouster of Kevin Rudd as prime minister by Gillard in June 2010, before which Obama had twice cancelled trips to Australia. While domestic American political considerations were given as the reason for the visit cancellations, the White House was clearly hostile to Rudd's calls for an Asian Pacific Community, which cut across Obama's determination to confront China. The second cancellation came on the eve of the Rudd's removal by Labor powerbrokers, who were "protected sources" for the US embassy in Canberra. At the very least, having been informed in advance, Obama gave the green light for Rudd's replacement by Gillard, who immediately fell into line with Washington.

If the Australian government had an attack of "cold feet" prior to Obama's visit last November, it was not because of concerns about "the possible reaction of the Labor left," as an Australian official told the *Herald*. Rather, the US military build-up in Australia, which places the Australian people on the frontline of any war between the US and China, threatened to trigger popular opposition. While the entire political establishment, including the Labor "lefts" and the Greens, fawned over Obama and backed the new military agreement, public

hostility to the US military had already been expressed in widespread opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the time, the Gillard government and the media played down the significance of a US military presence, claiming it posed no threat to China. Critics were howled down, especially by Murdoch's *Australian*. A year later, however, the economic and strategic dangers for Australian capitalism have become increasingly evident as China's economy has begun to slow and the US intervention in the region has inflamed key flashpoints, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

Woolcott's rather restrained comments are the latest in string of warnings about the dangers of war in Asia. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, analyst Linda Jakobson from the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, attacked the Gillard government for the "Pollyanna Asia Policy" contained in its White Paper.

Jakobson noted: "The paper makes no attempt to start grappling with what would become the most significant question to face Canberra in coming years: What will be Australia's role if the United States, Australia's major strategic ally, and China—Australia's paramount economic partner—clash?" She added that the paper did not even consider what Australia should do in the worst-case scenario of war.

While this discussion is taking place in the rarefied world of the foreign policy establishment, it must serve as a sharp warning to the working class and young people. Behind the scenes, preparations are being made for a conflict that would dwarf the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with devastating consequences for humanity as a whole.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact