

Australian prime minister reaffirms alignment with US against China

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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday used her first major statement in 2013—an election year—to announce that “national security” was her government’s most “fundamental task.” Gillard’s speech, entitled “Australia’s National Security Beyond the 9/11 Decade,” was an unambiguous declaration that Australian imperialism stands shoulder to shoulder with the Obama administration as Washington’s provocative efforts to undermine China’s influence inflame geopolitical tensions throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Gillard’s decision to start the year with a speech putting “national security” at the top of the government’s agenda reflects the enormous weight exerted by the US over Australian politics. Gillard was first installed as prime minister in an inner party coup in June 2010 that ousted her predecessor Kevin Rudd. His calls for an accommodation between the US and China had run counter to Obama’s plans for an aggressive containment policy. The factional Labor heavyweights who orchestrated Rudd’s removal were regarded as trusted assets in Washington. Just as she immediately aligned her government fully behind US strategic policy, so Gillard is reiterating that stance as the first plank of her Labor government’s re-election campaign.

Gillard’s speech, launching a new “National Security Strategy” document, asserted that the “9/11 decade” had ended and a new era begun. She declared that new “security imperatives” had arisen from the “shift of the global economic and strategic centre of gravity” to Asia. “The behaviour of states, not non-state actors,” would be “the most important driver and shaper of Australia’s national security thinking.”

Gillard began by endorsing the decade of illegal US-led wars, militarism and attacks on democratic rights carried out after 9/11, on the pretext of combatting the

“non-state” threat of terrorism. She referenced the war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, new anti-terrorism laws and the tripling of spending on Australian intelligence agencies. The prime minister included the Australian military interventions in East Timor and the Solomons under the rubric of the “war on terror,” thus negating previous, equally phoney claims, that these were humanitarian missions. She lauded the jailing of 23 people in Australia on charges of planning terrorist acts—convictions that largely stemmed from the actions of state provocateurs. Finally, Gillard hailed the death of Osama bin Laden and implicitly endorsed the criminal policy of state assassination being carried out by the Obama administration.

The new imperative, however, was the prospect of war in the Asia-Pacific. “It is the relationship between China and the United States that more than any other will determine the temperature of regional affairs in coming decades,” Gillard declared. “It inevitably brings with it strategic competition as China’s global interests expand.” While conflict was not inevitable, she said, the rivalries “raise the cost of any miscalculation that may occur in a range of regional flashpoints such as North Korea, the Taiwan Straits, the South China and East China seas or India-Pakistan.”

Each of the flashpoints cited by Gillard has been destabilised by Washington’s actions, and further inflamed since US President Obama announced his “pivot to Asia” in a November 2011 speech to the Australian parliament. The Korean peninsula remains on the brink of a catastrophic clash, due to US insistence on isolating North Korea. The Taiwan Straits are tense because of US arms sales to the Taipei government. The South China Sea is the scene of dangerous naval stand-offs due to implicit US backing for the territorial claims of the Philippines and Vietnam

against China's counter-claims. Washington has egged on Japan to take a tougher stance against China, raising tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to a fever pitch. The US has declared India a "strategic partner," heightening tensions with Pakistan, which once relied on American backing in its stand-off with New Delhi over the unresolved border dispute in Kashmir.

In this context, Gillard emphasised that her Labor government would "support our ally the United States in continuing to play its role as a stabilising force in the region." China, in other words, must retreat in the face of Washington's network of regional alliances and stepped-up military operations in Asia, or risk a confrontation.

The Australian government signed up in 2011 as a key adjunct in the US preparations for a potential war. Gillard struck agreements with Obama for the basing of US marines, ships and aircraft in the north and west of Australia, from where, with the assistance of Australian military forces, they can threaten to block Chinese access to vital sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and cut off China's essential supplies of energy and other raw materials.

In her speech yesterday, Gillard placed special emphasis on cyber warfare. The Australian intelligence agencies will no doubt ramp up their spying and monitoring of Chinese activity, on the pretext of combatting "malicious cyber activity."

Gillard's government is slashing public spending to bring the budget into surplus, but she concluded her speech with a guarantee, directed to the US, that the Australian military would remain a credible and reliable partner in any conflict. She pledged that "our level of defence expenditure will ensure that Australia remains one of the top 15 nations for absolute defence spending, and second only to the United States on a per capita basis."

For that pledge to be kept, the annual Australian defence budget would have to double to close to \$50 billion, or at least 4 percent of gross domestic product, in order to overtake the per capita military spending of Israel, Singapore and Saudi Arabia. That would mean even deeper cuts to health, education, welfare and other areas of social spending to reassure Washington of Australia's military capabilities. In particular, tens of billions of dollars would be needed to purchase a new

generation of jet fighters, warships and submarines, as well as to construct airbases and ports for American use.

Gillard did not overtly declare that the government's security policy was directed against China—a move that could have huge economic ramifications—because China is Australia's top trading partner. But no one in Beijing is under any illusion about the purpose of Obama's pivot and Australia's support for it. Last week, Chen Yuming, the Chinese ambassador to Australia, declared: "We do not believe it is appropriate to continue the Cold War-style of military cooperation or even go for confrontation or a containment mentality."

This week, the Chinese National Defence University's Colonel Liu Mingfu asked for the following message to be conveyed to Gillard: "America is the global tiger and Japan is Asia's wolf and both are madly biting China... Australia should never play the jackal for the tiger, or dance with the wolf... American hegemony is not at its dawn and not at its zenith, it is at its sunset and night is coming." Australia, he said, should act as a "kind-hearted lamb" and not follow the US or Japan into a military conflict.

Gillard's speech, however, stripped of its evasive language, made clear that Australian imperialism is lining up with the US, and increasingly putting the Australian military onto a war footing against China. The potential consequences, for the populations of Australia, the region and the world, are catastrophic.



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