

Australian PM's China trip prepared by top-level, secret committee

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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard arrived in China last night for a six-day tour, leading what she described as the “most senior Australian political delegation” ever to visit the country. Her entourage includes Foreign Minister Bob Carr, Trade Minister Craig Emerson, Financial Services Minister Bill Shorten, senior advisers and a business delegation of nearly 150 top executives.

Gillard's trip is being followed in the American press because she will be the first US ally to meet the new Chinese leadership of President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. The Gillard government, which can be relied upon to toe Washington's line and provide relevant intelligence, has become a key political tool for the Obama administration as it prosecutes its aggressive “pivot to Asia” to undermine China's growing influence.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed on Tuesday that the strategy for Gillard's trip was drawn up on March 21 at a high-powered meeting of top public service bureaucrats, who comprise the previously unknown Committee of Secretaries on China. The article was entitled, “Revealed: Canberra's secret China unit,” but gave no details of the decisions made and little information about the broader nature of the committee and its operations.

According to the *Herald*, there is “no comparable [public service] committee for any other country, region or policy area.” So why was it established? The committee's composition, as well as the timing of its formation, point to its real purpose—a major refocussing of all aspects of the Australian state apparatus on China, as an integral part of Washington's confrontational policies toward Beijing.

The committee was set up in December 2010, just months after Gillard ousted her predecessor, Kevin

Rudd, in an anti-democratic inner Labor Party coup in June, then formed an unstable minority government following elections in August. The *Herald* obliquely referred to the underlying issue, saying the committee was formed following “criticism that the federal government was struggling to keep track... of the nation [China] that has come to dominate Australia's trade accounts and is reconfiguring the geopolitical order.”

These remarks highlight the acute dilemma confronting the Australian ruling class—its economic fortunes are bound up with the dramatic growth of the Chinese economy, but that expansion is bringing Beijing into conflict with Australia's longstanding strategic ally, the United States. The Obama administration's “rebalancing” to Asia from mid-2009 compounded the difficulties.

The “criticism” to which the *Herald* refers was quite specific: the Obama administration was hostile to Rudd's initiatives to try to ease tensions between the US and China, right at the point when Washington geared up for what some commentators called “a full-court press” against China. The handful of Labor Party and trade union power brokers who engineered Rudd's sudden removal all had close connections to Washington.

Because of the shaky character of her government, however, Gillard was compelled to appoint Rudd as foreign minister in September 2010. Even as she did so, Gillard pledged fealty to the US and insisted that while the running of foreign policy would be a team effort: “Ultimately, of course, I'm the leader.”

Gillard's cabinet established the secretive committee on China to reinforce Canberra's—and Washington's—new focus on Beijing. The committee's composition is extraordinary: chaired by the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, it includes the

heads of about 20 departments and agencies, including Treasury, defence, the prime minister and cabinet, as well as apparently unrelated areas such as health, education and customs.

The presence of the defence chief, as well as intelligence and police agencies—the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Australian Federal Police and Office of National Assessments (ONA) were specifically named—demonstrates that the committee’s purpose is far from benign. Washington may not have a direct representative on the committee, but it is plugged in via a web of ties at every level of the Australian state apparatus, especially defence and intelligence.

According to the *Herald*, the committee meets only once every three months. However, it directs what one source described as a “massive” revamp of training and recruitment to build China experience and knowledge across the public service. Treasury has set up a special “China unit” focussing on economic issues. “The intelligence agencies have been targeting graduates with China knowledge and language, Canberra sources say,” the article noted.

In a media conference on Thursday, Gillard flatly denied any conflict between Australian economic ties with China, and the military alliance with the US. She declared: “I don’t view the strong and growing relationship we have with China as somehow in contest or in contrast to the relationship we have with the United States.” She claimed that neither Canberra nor Washington sought to “contain” Beijing.

Actions speak otherwise. Gillard will, of course, seek to strengthen economic ties with China in a bid to boost the slowing Australian economy. A new currency swap arrangement between Australia and China has been mooted. But on foreign and defence policy, the Australian ministers signalled that they will press Washington’s agenda, which directly cuts across Chinese interests.

Foreign Minister Carr foreshadowed his intention to raise concerns about North Korea’s “provocative behaviour” and push for China to act to rein in its ally. “I would expect the Chinese to give us an account of the measures they’ve take so far... and [engage in] a discussion where we’d explore with them, further action they might take,” he said. In reality, Washington has deliberately inflamed tensions on the Korean

peninsula to justify a military build-up in North East Asia and to press China into forcing North Korea to make concessions.

In November 2011, Obama laid out his “pivot to Asia” in an address to the Australian parliament and announced a deal with Gillard to open up Australian military bases for US marines, warships, drones and warplanes. Gillard’s trip to China is her first since then. Chinese leaders are expected to raise their concerns that these measures are directed against Beijing. Speaking on Thursday, Gillard dismissed the issue, saying the stationing of US marines in Darwin was “not news”—an approach she will no doubt pursue in China.

Australia is developing closer relations with the Chinese armed forces through joint drills and exchanges—a process welcomed in Washington as a means of getting a closer look at China’s defence capabilities. “Australia is way out in front of us and, as a key US ally, that can work to our advantage in promoting a more transparent and co-operative Chinese military,” Bonnie Glaser, an analyst with the Washington-based thinktank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, told the *Herald*.

On this, as on every strategic issue, the Gillard government has functioned as a loyal point man for the Obama administration. The prime minister will do the same during her current trip to China.



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