

A warning of the escalating danger of US-China conflict

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In the course of its 2013 election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party is puncturing the conspiracy of silence surrounding US preparations for war against China, and the intimate involvement of the Australian Labor government in these plans.

In the rarefied atmosphere of think tanks and strategic policy circles in the US and Australia, the strategic implications of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" are being continuously discussed and debated. However, the media and political establishment, well aware of the political threat posed by the emergence of a conscious anti-war movement, rarely refers to the dangers of a US-China conflict, even obliquely.

Occasionally a dissenting voice appears. In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article on May 28, strategic analyst Hugh White declared: "There is something obsessive about the way our leaders keep saying that Australia does not have to choose between America and China. [Prime Minister] Julia Gillard says it almost every time she talks about foreign policy. [Foreign Minister] Bob Carr and [Defence Minister] Stephen Smith cling to it."

As White pointed out, the same mantra is repeated by the opposition Liberal-National Coalition leaders. The conception that no conflict is looming and Australian capitalism can somehow continue to balance between Washington and Beijing underpins the government's foreign, economic and strategic policies.

Behind the public equanimity lies the fundamental dilemma wracking Australian capitalism, which is heavily dependent economically on China, while continuing to depend strategically and militarily on its longstanding alliance with American imperialism.

By declaring that "we don't have to choose", Australian political leaders are trying to dupe the public into believing that the obvious rise in tensions throughout Asia, as a result of the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" directed against China, will not lead to

breakdown, conflict and war.

White's aim is certainly not to alert the working class to these dangers. He speaks for a layer of the ruling elite that is alarmed at the prospect of war in the region and the potential damage to the interests of Australian capitalism. While he blames China, not the US, for rising tensions, White has, in previous articles and essays, appealed for debate over how to ameliorate the developing confrontation and avoid conflict.

In the *Herald* article, White condemned political leaders for "shamelessly evading this question" of choosing between China and the US. "If they turn out to be wrong, and we do have to choose, all our ideas about Australia's future will be overturned. How can we be secure without America? How can we be prosperous without China? These are the questions they want to evade, because they have no answers to them," he declared.

White, a former senior government adviser, intelligence agency analyst and now academic, is well aware of "the very real signs that rivalry between America and China is growing fast. This can be seen in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, where disputed islands are merely tokens in a contest in which it wants to show that it [China] can challenge America at sea, and America wants to prove that it cannot. Underlying this is China's strategic build-up in Asia, and America's own build-up in response."

Appealing for a discussion on what can be done to address these tensions, White warned that "things could easily be brought to a head by a US-China clash somewhere like the East China Sea. If that happens, America will ask for direct Australian military support against China. How will 'we do not have to choose' sound then?"

In fact, the Labor government has made a choice—to line up fully behind the aggressive US military agenda against

China. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted by pro-US Labor and union powerbrokers in June 2010, and Julia Gillard installed, precisely because he, like White, proposed diplomatic measures to lessen tensions between the two countries. These measures cut across the Obama administration's plans to ratchet up the pressure on China across the board throughout Asia.

The potentially disastrous economic fall-out from a break in Australia's economic relations with China has generated sharp divisions in ruling circles over the orientation of Australian foreign policy. But, by giving the green light for Rudd's ouster, the Obama administration has made clear that the US will not allow any, even limited, deviation from Washington's policies in a country that is critical to its war plans.

Gillard has since marched in lockstep with Obama, giving the US president the floor of the Australian parliament to formally announce his "pivot" in November 2011 and signing an agreement to station a US Marine taskforce in Darwin. Since then, her Labor government has held top level meetings to discuss the further opening up of Australian bases to American warships and warplanes to facilitate US military operations in the Indo-Pacific.

The government's recent defence white paper, while declaring that Australia does not have to choose between China and US, outlines arms purchases and new basing arrangements with the US that are completely in line with Washington's requirements.

The Pentagon regards the north and west of Australia as a key staging area, particularly for an economic blockade sealing off key waterways through South East Asia used by China to import energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

Australian military forces are being closely integrated into US plans. In a speech last weekend at the Shangri-la Security Dialogue in Singapore, US Secretary of State Chuck Hagel highlighted the fact that an Australian navy frigate is now "embedded" with a US aircraft carrier battle group in North East Asia and that the presence of US Marines in Darwin will be expanded.

Even the Gillard's government's mantra, "we don't have to choose between the US and China", follows the script prescribed by Washington. As the US relentlessly builds up its military forces and forges closer diplomatic, economic and military ties throughout Asia, top Obama officials routinely deny that they are seeking to "contain", "encircle" or confront China. They "welcome" China's rise, but only as long as Beijing accepts the "international

rules-based system"—that is, the existing global order in which US imperialism dominates and sets the rules.

China's transformation over the past two decades into the world's largest cheap labour platform has required the import of ever larger quantities of raw materials and energy, bringing it into conflict with the US and other major powers in Asia, Africa and Latin America. American imperialism cannot tolerate any challenge to its global hegemony. Herein lies the driving force for militarism and war. As the global capitalist crisis worsens, the US is recklessly using its military might to offset its historic decline and prevent the further rise of what it regards as a potentially dangerous rival.

The devastating implications of the US war drive for the working class in Australia, the region and around the world are being systematically suppressed from public debate. Obama has transformed the entire Indo-Pacific into an arena of intrigue and rivalry, deliberately inflaming existing flashpoints and creating new ones, any one of which can trigger confrontation and military conflict. A war between the US and China would almost certainly escalate rapidly to the use of nuclear weapons, drawing in all the major powers, resulting in economic ruin and tens, if not, hundreds of millions of deaths.

Behind the backs of the working class, the Gillard government has fully committed to this catastrophic agenda, making Australian military bases prime targets and putting the Australian population on the frontline. The escalating drive to war cannot be stopped through appeals to the powers that be, but requires the building of a powerful, international anti-war movement of the working class to abolish capitalism and its outmoded nation state system, which is the root cause of rivalry and conflict. The SEP, along with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is campaigning to build such a movement on the basis of the fight for workers' governments and socialist policies. I urge workers and youth in Australia and internationally to actively support our campaign.

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