

A debate on the US-Australia alliance

SEP candidates challenge US ambassador

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IQ2, an organisation that hosts debates on political and social questions, sponsored an August 1 forum in Sydney on the US-Australia alliance. Speaking in favour of the motion, that “The US Alliance is our (Australia’s) best defence,” was outgoing US ambassador Jeffrey Bleich.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidates for the upcoming federal elections spoke from the floor, and challenged Bleich’s attempts to obfuscate the militaristic character of the alliance, warning that it was the vehicle for lining up the Australian population with the US war drive against China.

Since being appointed ambassador by the Obama administration in 2009, Bleich has played a central part in Australia’s integration into the US military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region, a key component of its preparations for an attack on China. The US embassy’s web site notes that Bleich recently oversaw the largest joint US-Australian military exercise in history. Dubbed Talisman Saber, the operation last month in Queensland, which involved more than 20,000 US military personnel, 10,000 Australian troops, and over 20 ships, was a rehearsal for a naval blockade directed against China.

Bleich also played a pivotal role in the establishment of a US marine base in Darwin, and a series of other measures aimed at deepening the collaboration of Australian and American armed forces, under the military agreement signed by former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, and US President Barack Obama, in 2011.

In his opening contribution to the debate, Bleich made no mention of this record. Instead, he claimed that the primary threats facing Australia were resource shortages, cybercrimes and transnational criminal networks. He blithely denied the possibility of a

military conflict in the Asia-Pacific region, and cynically denounced claims that the US was attempting to contain China through its military buildup in the region, as fanciful ideas used by journalists to sell books.

Discussing cybercrime, Bleich made veiled references to the Australian government’s intimate involvement in the massive US spying operation directed against the world’s population. He insisted on the need to thwart “cyber criminal networks,” some of whom wanted to “take down governments”—an implied justification for the US government’s persecution of whistleblowers Bradley Manning, Edward Snowden and Julian Assange.

Bleich’s lies went largely unchallenged on the official platform.

Speaking against the motion, Professor Zhu Feng from Peking University referred to Washington’s military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific region, warning that it threatened to inflame Chinese nationalism and encourage China to militarise. Articulating the fear of broad sections of the Chinese regime of a military conflict with the US, Zhu impotently called for the US, Australia and China to come together.

Also opposing the motion, nominally at least, was retired Major-General Jim Molan, a former commander of the multinational forces carrying out the US-led occupation of Iraq. He essentially supported the US-Australia alliance, but argued that Australia had to “stop relying on the US,” dramatically increase military spending, and build a military capable of prosecuting the interests of Australian imperialism in its own right.

While Bleich received no opposition from the platform, a series of audience members posed questions and points in opposition to American militarism, and

the reactionary character of the US-Australia alliance. They were allowed just one minute.

Nick Beams, one of the SEP's Senate candidates for NSW, and the party's national secretary, noted that during Kevin Rudd's initial prime ministership, Obama had twice cancelled scheduled visits to Australia. He had visited only following Rudd's ousting, and Gillard's installation as prime minister.

Referring to US embassy cables published by WikiLeaks, Beams explained: "It is now known that at that time, the United States was hostile to Rudd's conception of an Asia-Pacific community, in which the US would have to make some accommodation to China's aspirations in the region, in order to head off a situation analogous to that which developed between Britain and Germany prior to World War One."

Beams referred to Rudd's removal in 2010 by Labor apparatchiks and trade union bureaucrats, a number of whom were described in US embassy cables as "protected US assets." He outlined the unprecedented character of Obama's decision to announce a major shift in foreign policy, "the pivot to Asia," from the floor of the Australian parliament, and warned that behind the backs of the population, the US and Australian governments were preparing for a war against China.

Bleich responded to Beams, and to all critical points from the floor, with a combination of blatant lies and cynical evasions. He said Obama's visits during Rudd's first tenure as prime minister had been cancelled due to political developments in the US, and Washington had been "very happy" with Rudd's views on the Asia-Pacific. That claim is directly contradicted by diplomatic cables from Bleich's own embassy. (See: "WikiLeaks cables expose US hostility to Rudd's Asia Pacific Community plan")

Peter Symonds, a SEP Senate candidate for Western Australia, and the national editor of the WSWS, also spoke from the floor. He exposed the fraudulent character of Bleich's claims that US military interventions were carried out for humanitarian purposes. Symonds denounced the predatory US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the campaigns for "regime change" in Libya, and now Syria.

Symonds outlined the critical function of the US Pine Gap base in central Australia in the coordination of American drone strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan and

Yemen, and the recent revelations that the base was central to all American military operations in the Eastern Hemisphere. Pointing to Edward Snowden's revelations, he indicted the US government as the world's greatest cybercriminal network, engaged in the illegal surveillance of American citizens and masses of people internationally. Symonds stated that the key figures in the Obama administration should face trial for major war crimes and unprecedented attacks on democratic rights at home.

Bleich answered none of Symonds' charges.

Other audience members voiced criticisms of the US and Australian governments. One expressed opposition to the Obama administration's persecution of Julian Assange. Others voiced their hostility to American imperialism's record of destabilising and removing regimes viewed as a threat to its interests, and the Labor government's decision to allow American nuclear submarines to dock in Australian ports. One questioner stated that Washington's pivot to Asia is clearly aimed at containing China, while others noted that American imperialism's international operations are aimed at furthering its interests.

Bleich, having brushed aside criticisms and answered none of the points, cynically concluded his remarks by thanking the audience for its "provocative questions."

In polling before the debate, roughly one third of the audience expressed support for the US-Australia alliance, one third was opposed, and another third undecided. In the vote following the debate, 54 percent registered opposition to the alliance, while the percentage in favour remained unchanged.

The significant shift in sentiment at the meeting—in no small measure a result of the intervention of the SEP's candidates and other audience members—indicates why the Australian political establishment is so concerned to suppress information and block any wider public debate about Australian government involvement in US preparations for war against China.

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