

# Australian PM's naval plans in line with US “pivot to Asia”

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In his only foreign policy speech of the September 7 election campaign, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd yesterday made clear his full support, not only for US plans to attack Syria, but for the Obama administration's military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region, directed against China.

Speaking at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, Rudd made no direct reference to Obama's “pivot to Asia.” Nevertheless, he outlined a major repositioning of Australian naval assets that is fully in line with the Pentagon's war plans. Garden Island in Sydney Harbour, known as Fleet Base East, where much of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is currently based, would be relocated further north to Brisbane, as well as Townsville, Cairns and Darwin, and to Western Australia at Perth and Broome by 2030.

Rudd was ousted as prime minister in June 2010 in an inner-party coup by Labor and trade union power-brokers with close connections to the US embassy in Canberra. He had earned the enmity of the Obama administration by calling for a power-sharing deal between the US and China in Asia. That cut across Washington's efforts to undermine China's strategic position in the region. Rudd's replacement, Julia Gillard, fell completely into line with Obama, allowing the US president to announce his “pivot” in the Australian parliament in November 2011. She agreed to US demands for greater access to Australian military bases, including the stationing of US Marines in Darwin.

Rudd used his speech yesterday to underline his support for the integration of Australian military forces into US war preparations. A major study by the US think tank, the Center for Strategic and Independent Studies, conducted for the Pentagon last year, identified Australian bases in the north and west of

Australia—especially Darwin and the Stirling naval base near Perth—as critical to the US “rebalance” to Asia.

An essential component of the Pentagon's strategy against China is the ability to impose an economic blockade by cutting off shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean that are vital for China's import of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Asia. Australian bases in Darwin and Perth provide ready access to the Indian Ocean and key “chokepoints” through South East Asia, such as the Malacca Strait, through which shipping must pass.

Rudd's plans announced yesterday not only provide expanded facilities for RAN vessels, but also for US warships and other military assets. Rudd highlighted the new Australian warships due to come into service—Amphibious Assault Ships and Air Warfare Destroyers—that will complement US forces in the region. The build-up of Australian amphibious forces is entirely in line with US naval planning, released last week, to have a full US Marine Expeditionary Unit based in Darwin by 2018 for deployment anywhere in Asia.

In his speech, Rudd did not refer directly to the mounting tensions between the US and China. He is acutely aware of the fundamental dilemma facing the Australian ruling class, which depends economically on exports to Asia, especially China, but relies completely on its longstanding military alliance with the United States to defend the interests of Australian imperialism in the Asia Pacific.

Rudd was deliberately vague about the “future challenges to our north-east, north and north-west.” But having spoken of the Australian economy's dependence on Asia, especially China's economic rise, he declared that “you can't have economic prosperity in the absence of strategic stability.” He pointed to

dangerous flashpoints, such as the Korean Peninsula and maritime disputes involving China and its neighbours in the South China and East China Seas, and warned of security arrangements in Asia that were “positively 19th century in character.”

Rudd made this latter oblique reference to the great power rivalry that led to World War I more explicit in January in an article published by the US journal *Foreign Affairs*. He warned: “These are no ordinary times in East Asia. With tensions rising from conflicting territorial claims in the East China and South China seas, the region increasingly resembles a 21st century maritime redux of the Balkans a century ago—a tinderbox on water... In security terms, the region is more brittle than at any time since the fall of Saigon in 1975.”

In that article, Rudd argued at length for diplomatic mechanisms to ameliorate the rising tensions between the US and China. He effectively shelved those proposals in yesterday’s speech, referring only to the Labor government’s assistance in expanding the East Asian Summit to include the US. The Obama administration has exploited that forum to encourage South East Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines to take a more aggressive stance in their maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Rudd’s reference, in yesterday’s speech, to the need for a “rules-based order for the Asia Pacific” is likewise another leaf taken out of the US administration’s playbook. Obama has repeatedly declared that the US is willing to accommodate China within the existing “rules-based order”—that is, one in which the rules are set from Washington, in order to ensure continued US global domination.

Rudd has never been anti-American or opposed to the US alliance, in any sense. In fact, as revealed in a WikiLeaks cable, while speaking to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009, he acknowledged that military force would be used if “everything goes wrong” with his plans to moderate US-China tensions.

Rudd’s speech yesterday, reportedly organised with the Lowy Institute at short notice, appears to have been an attempt to prove his pro-US credentials and garner support in Australian ruling circles for his flagging campaign to retain office. After giving the speech, he belittled opposition leader Tony Abbott’s credentials to manage foreign policy, declaring Abbott to be a

political “pugilist” who lacked the temperament to “sit back, think and calmly reflect” on decisions.

Rudd’s speech has largely fallen flat, with scant coverage in today’s press, reflecting the determination in the political establishment not to publicly discuss the US preparations for war against China, fearing that would provoke popular opposition. The limited commentary either criticised Rudd’s plans to shift naval assets from Sydney as ill-thought out and costly, or reduced his naval basing plan to the small change of electoral politics—supposedly designed to boost jobs in Brisbane. The conspiracy of silence continues on the dangers of a US war on China.

Whether or not Rudd wins the September 7 election, the plans unveiled yesterday highlight the close integration of the Australian military into the US military build-up against China that will continue whichever party forms the next government.



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