

# Australian PM-elect pledges support for US war in Syria

Mike Head

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Following a phone call from US President Barack Obama, Australia's prime minister-elect Tony Abbott yesterday unequivocally declared support for an American assault on Syria.

Ostensibly, Obama rang to congratulate Abbott on his Liberal-National Coalition's victory in last Saturday's Australian federal election. From what has been reported publicly, however, the discussion turned swiftly to ensuring Abbott's commitment to Washington's two key agenda items: war against Syria and confrontation with China.

Abbott's spokesman said he was honoured to take the call, and told Obama that America remained Australia's greatest friend. Referring to Obama's Tuesday night televised speech announcing a decision to engage in diplomatic manoeuvres at the UN before attacking Syria, Abbott commended the president on a "fine speech."

Abbott said that if Syria could be chastised without the use of force, that would be welcome, but the United States would have Australia's strongest support if military force were required. Abbott did not specify whether this support extended to direct military participation, but any strike on Syria would necessarily involve the use of the Pine Gap satellite communications base in central Australia.

Abbott's response points to the chief reason for Obama's call: to line up international backing for war on Syria, which is being prepared behind the smokescreen of demanding that the Assad regime hand over its chemical weapons.

If the Labor government had survived last Saturday, its response would have been no different. Despite overwhelming public opposition to a war on Syria, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's government was one of the few in the world to openly declare its support for

US military strikes on the basis of lies about the Syrian regime's alleged use of chemical weapons. (See: "Australian government backs unilateral US attack on Syria")

During the election campaign, Abbott initially adopted a cautious approach, but began to shift to a more unequivocal position in Washington's direction, particularly following an earlier personal call from Obama to Rudd on August 26.

After that phone call, Rudd dropped earlier talk of waiting for UN inspectors to confirm the facts of alleged use of chemical gas by the Assad regime, declaring that "overwhelming evidence" existed and a "robust response" was needed. By August 31, Rudd was lockstep with the Obama administration, saying he had "high confidence" that the Syrian government was responsible for the alleged chemical weapons attack, without providing any evidence to back the claim.

Abbott moved in the same direction, asserting that the US had the right to attack Syria unilaterally—an illegal act of military aggression—without any UN vote. He cited the 1999 US-led bombing of the former Yugoslavia as a "precedent for right-thinking powers to take action" when the UN Security Council was "for whatever reason ineffective."

At the same time, Abbott remained guarded, expressing reservations about the political composition of the so-called Syrian rebels. "It's not goodies versus baddies, it's baddies versus baddies and that's why it's very important that we don't make a very difficult situation worse." While Labor castigated Abbott for "John Wayne" foreign diplomacy, his comments reflected concerns in ruling circles over the implications of supporting a Syrian opposition dominated by Al Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalist elements.

Having had high-level defence and foreign policy briefings in preparation for taking office next week, Abbott's line has now shifted to an unconditional endorsement of Washington's war plans.

In the course of yesterday's phone call, Obama and Abbott also discussed "the need to improve trade and investment links in the region, and agreed to work cooperatively towards the Trans-Pacific Partnership." The TPP, which is designed to exclude China, is a trade pact being pushed by Washington to undercut China's growing economic clout in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is a component of the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" which involved confronting China diplomatically, economically and militarily. The opposition Coalition fully supported the decision of the previous Labor government in November 2011 to station Marines in Darwin in northern Australia and to open other Australian military bases to US forces. The Pentagon is engaged in a major military build-up, which involves strengthening military alliances and stationing 60 percent of the US navy and air force in the Indo-Pacific region.

Earlier yesterday, Abbott farewelled outgoing US Ambassador Jeffrey Bleich at Canberra's Parliament House, describing the "American relationship" as "the cornerstone of Australia's security policy" and declaring that "America remains an incredibly important part of our economic prospects."

Abbott has clearly aligned himself behind Washington and against those in Australian ruling circles, such as his Liberal Party leadership rival Malcolm Turnbull, who have urged the US to accommodate itself to the rise of China. These tensions reflect the fundamental dilemma confronting Australian capitalism—its military and strategic dependence on the US versus its increasing economic reliance on China.

Abbott today appointed former Prime Minister John Howard's senior international adviser to his Prime Minister's Office. Andrew Shearer, who will be senior adviser on national security, is known to be a strong supporter of the "pivot."

In a November 2011 op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal*, just after Obama formally announced the new policy in the Australian parliament, Shearer wrote that a "greater US presence will provide Australia with welcome strategic reassurance" and described Australia as the long-time "steadfast 'southern anchor' of the US

alliance network in Asia." Shearer also referred to the TPP as "one key element in this strategy."

Abbott's alignment is in keeping with his role as a key cabinet minister in Howard's government, which joined the criminal US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—based on cynical lies about combatting terrorism and "weapons of mass destruction." In return, Washington backed the Howard government's own neo-colonial military interventions in the Solomon Islands in 2003, taking over key aspects of the island state's administration, and East Timor in 2006, engineering the ousting of the Fretilin government that had been strengthening ties with Australian rivals for influence—Portugal and China.

The US drive to war on Syria is intimately connected to the Obama administration's broader military build-up against China. Washington is seeking to oust the Syrian regime as part of preparations for regime-change against its ally, Iran, and to ensure unchallenged US domination in the Middle East over potential rivals such as China and Russia.

Throughout the Australian election campaign, Obama's pivot and the dangers posed by the US war drive against China were completely blacked out by the media and the major parties—Labor, the Coalition and the Greens. Once again, behind the backs of the Australian people, the incoming government has committed itself to back aggressive and inflammatory US-led wars in the Middle East and Asia that will have bloody and catastrophic consequences.



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