

Australian foreign minister toes US line during Asian trip

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10 December 2013

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop concluded a four-day tour of Indonesia, China, and the Philippines on Sunday, amid the US-fuelled diplomatic row over rival territorial and air defence zone claims, and ongoing fallout from the revelations of US-Australian spying operations. Far from defusing tensions, Bishop used her visit to Asia to affirm Canberra's unalloyed support for the provocative stance against China adopted by Washington and its allies in the region, including Japan.

The foreign minister travelled to Jakarta last Thursday, meeting with her Indonesian counterpart Marty Natalegawa. The Indonesian government is maintaining its suspension of normal diplomatic and military-police relations with Australia, in protest over the revelation, via National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden, that Australian intelligence agencies tapped the phones of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, his wife, and at least eight senior political figures in Jakarta. The operation formed part of Australia's involvement in the US-led "Five Eyes" global surveillance network.

Consistent with the Liberal-National government's refusal to apologise for the phone tapping, Bishop again merely expressed "regret" over the "hurt caused."

She and Natalegawa, however, were both keen to emphasise progress toward normalising relations. Bishop agreed to Indonesia's suggestion of a new "special communications channel" or "hotline." The two figures announced progress toward a new intelligence "code of conduct" proposed by Yudhoyono. Bishop pledged that "the Abbott government will not undertake any act or use our assets and resources, including intelligence assets, in any way to harm Indonesia."

Natalegawa told the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation this "absolutely" meant "there would be no further espionage from Australian assets in Indonesia and no more eavesdropping." He added: "No spying. No more bugging. No more tapping." Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, however, immediately shot this down. Asked on talkback radio whether his government had agreed to stop spying, Abbott bluntly answered: "No, and they certainly haven't agreed to stop collecting intelligence on Australia."

Concerns are evident within the Australian political and foreign policy establishment over the Abbott government's apparent inability to resolve the diplomatic crisis with Jakarta. Indonesia is one of the most strategically important parts of the globe. US imperialism's preparations for war against China involve the American and Australian armed forces closing off naval "choke points" in the archipelago, through which vital Chinese oil and other imports transit through.

Australian National University strategic studies professor Hugh White, a former intelligence official, wrote in today's *Age*: "Indonesia wants Australia to make a choice. We can collect intelligence on it, or we can have a good relationship, but not both. Tony Abbott and Julie Bishop want to avoid that choice, or at least appear to avoid it, by restoring the relationship without really promising to stop spying. To do so they are stooping to wordplay, or even to dissimulation. No good can come of this. It simply sows the seeds of further crises."

Similar fears have been raised over the growing tensions with Beijing, Australia's most important economic partner. The Chinese government sharply criticised Canberra's full-throated support for Washington's refusal to recognise the new Chinese air

defence identification zone in the East China Sea.

Bishop received a public dressing down in Beijing. Sitting across the table from Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Bishop posed for the usual photo opportunity before discussions began behind closed doors. Wang, however, declared before the assembled Chinese and Australian journalists: “What Australia has said and done ... has jeopardised bilateral mutual trust and affected the sound growth of bilateral relations.”

Bishop was visibly taken aback by this departure from diplomatic protocol, but immediately responded with a strident defence of the US-Australian stance. “I must take issue with you on the matter of the East China Sea,” she declared. “We stand by our view.” As she was mid-sentence, Chinese officials ushered the reporters and cameramen out of the room. Bishop again confirmed Canberra’s position when she met with Japan’s Defence Minister, Itsunori Onodera, in the Philippines on Sunday, during the final leg of her Asian trip.

In today’s *Australian Financial Review*, the former Labor government’s foreign minister Bob Carr noted an apparent shift in the government’s language on Japan. Citing the recent remarks of Bishop, that Japan is “our best friend in Asia,” and Abbott, that Australia is “a strong ally of Japan,” Carr responded: “Strong ally? We don’t have an alliance with Japan, not in the ANZUS [US alliance] sense, although in the current climate Japan may be interested in one. We do have a strategic partnership, which includes annual meetings of defence and foreign ministers. But this falls short of justifying the prime minister’s noun ‘ally’, far less the adjective ‘strong.’”

Carr noted that the government’s response to China’s ADIZ “went further than our friends in New Zealand, Canada and Singapore.” He continued: “We might have opted to register our concerns about the Chinese air defence zone in a private communication; a fine-line decision, but an option that would have left no doubt about our continued neutrality.” New Zealand, for instance, has sought to avoid taking sides in the dispute between Japan and China. (New Zealand calls for “constructive dialogue” on Chinese air defence zone <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/12/07/nzaz-d07.html>).

Carr followed the pro-US line throughout the period he served as foreign minister in the Labor government,

which unconditionally backed the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia. This strategic shift, first announced in Canberra by the US president in November 2011, is directly responsible for leading the region to the brink of war. Carr’s criticisms of the Abbott government’s stance are entirely hypocritical—but they point to sharp divisions within the ruling elite over how to manoeuvre as tensions escalate between the US, Australian imperialism’s long-standing diplomatic and military ally, and China, its largest trade partner.

For its part, the Abbott government has gone out of its way to demonstrate its support for Washington’s war drive against China.

On December 3, Defence Minister David Johnston delivered a bellicose speech to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. He declared that Australia “has a vital national interest in freedom of the navigation of the seas and of international air space, including in Southeast and North Asia, which are critical markets for us.” Boasting that the government had quickly delivered a “significant extension of our existing defence cooperation and arrangements with the US,” Johnston declared that the drawdown of Australian troops from Afghanistan, East Timor and Solomon Islands would not produce any “peace dividend.” In fact, he explained, “the opposite is true”—the government would significantly boost military expenditure.

Rather ominously, Johnston twice repeated a slogan from the US Submariner’s Handbook, beginning and ending his speech with the declaration: “Train today as if next week is the first week of war.”



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