Australian prime minister threatens to “shirtfront” Vladimir Putin

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Close to three months after the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over Ukraine on July 17, Prime Minister Tony Abbott told reporters on Tuesday that he was “going to shirtfront” Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G20 Leaders’ Summit in Brisbane next month. “I am going to be saying to Mr Putin, Australians were murdered,” Abbott asserted. “They were murdered by Russian-backed rebels using Russian-supplied equipment.”

A “shirtfront” is when an Australian Rules Football player charges at high speed and crashes his shoulder directly into the open chest of an opponent, with the intention of violently knocking him to the ground. More often than not, it results in injuries.

For a G20 leader to threaten another with physical violence—even if figuratively—indicates how far diplomatic norms have broken down under the impact of rising global geopolitical tensions and economic turmoil. Abbott’s words were not the language of diplomacy, but the language of war, directed toward the head of a nuclear-armed state and the world’s fifth largest economy.

A bemused representative of the Russian embassy in Canberra, Alexander Odoevskiy, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that, as no requests had been made by either Australia or Russia for a meeting of the two leaders during the G20, “we are not sure where exactly and when the Australian prime minister would like to ‘shirtfront’ President Putin.”

Odoevskiy blandly stated to the ABC: “It is quite obvious that Russian-Australian relations are at a historic low.”

While the drumbeat of accusations continues, blaming pro-Russian separatists for the downing of MH17, other evidence points to the involvement of the Ukrainian military. On August 7, the Malaysian *New Strait Times* published explosive claims that the airliner was shot down by missiles and machine guns fired by Ukrainian jet fighters. A supposed independent investigation has not been completed and there is no indication as to when it will.

The Abbott government, however, has shamelessly exploited the deaths of 38 Australian citizens and permanent residents in the MH17 disaster to serve as Washington’s cat’s paw in a campaign to demonise Moscow. Within hours of the aircraft’s downing, Abbott made the unsubstantiated assertion that it was “almost certain” that it been “shot down” by a “Russian-supplied surface-to-air missile.” He accused Moscow of directing and arming the Russian-speaking separatists in eastern Ukraine who are opposed to the pro-US, fascist-backed government in Kiev.

On July 21, utilising Australia’s temporary seat on the UN Security Council, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop moved a resolution demanding a ceasefire in the separatist-held area where MH17 crashed and for “all parties” to cooperate with the deployment of an international investigation team. Russia, confronting threats of greater sanctions by the US and European powers, agreed to the wording of the non-binding resolution, reportedly after “long, drawn-out and fraught” negotiations with Bishop and Australian diplomats.

On July 25, Abbott provocatively announced that Australian Federal Police officers would be deployed to provide “security” for investigators at the Russian separatist-held crash site, at the invitation of the Ukrainian regime.

Over the following weeks, the Ukrainian military and fascist militias, fully backed by the US, Germany, other European powers and Australia, utilised the situation to wage bloody offensives against the separatists, killing

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hundreds of civilians and displacing thousands more. Moreover, the purported threat posed by Russia has been exploited to deploy greater NATO forces into Eastern Europe and hype up calls in Germany for a massive build-up of its military forces and capabilities.

In Australia, the Abbott government's aggressive stance toward Russia has been supported by the opposition Labor Party, the Greens and the establishment media. The Greens, in fact, have been the most bellicose, demanding that Putin be banned from setting foot in Australia for the G20.

Abbott's "shirtfront" comment on Tuesday followed provocative statements by Labor leader Bill Shorten the same day, after the government acknowledged that it had no power to stop a G20 leader attending the summit. Shorten alleged there was "plenty of evidence to indicate indirect if not direct Russian involvement" in an "act of murder." He declared it was "extremely frustrating to see this Putin fellow come to Australia" and asserted the Russian president should "show enough conscience" to not attend the G20, "because he's rubbing our faces in it."

Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the *Australian*, wrote yesterday: "The Abbott government should make it so clear to Russia's Vladimir Putin that he is not welcome here, that he is shamed into staying home… The Russians committed a crime, and Australians were the victims… Putin is the author of those policies. He should not be welcomed into Australia for any reason on any pretext."

Australia's stance toward Russia underscores the key international role it is playing as an adjunct for US imperialism, not only in Asia as part of the anti-China "pivot" and in the wars in the Middle East, but also in relation to Washington's intrigues in Eastern Europe. As a middle-order imperialist power, Australia is reliant on US support in order to prosecute its own strategic and economic interests in the region and internationally.

What makes Canberra so useful to Washington is that Australian politicians can voice things that the US and its other allies cannot, or do not want, to say immediately. If Obama had used such war-like language against Putin, alarm bells would have sounded about a confrontation between the nuclear-armed powers. Germany, France, Britain and Japan are all embroiled with Russia over complex issues in Europe and Asia, and, as a result, tend to choose their words more carefully. Abbott, the prime minister of a remote middle power, can play the role of crude provocateur with relative impunity.

Abbott would not have spoken about the Russian president in such a manner without prior consultation with the Obama administration. He is not about to pick a political fight without US backing. As for Obama, while not wanting to formally block Putin from the summit, Abbott's words are clearly designed to send a message to Putin that the US confrontation with Russia continues and his reception at the G20 will be a hot one.

Russian parliamentarian and Putin advisor Vyacheslav Nikonov indicated that the message was received. He told the ABC's "Lateline" program: "It's quite [a] predictable statement because Tony Abbott is known as one of the closest allies to the United States and his political position is not at all different from that of Washington DC. And we know what they say about Russia in Washington DC."

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