

Australian Prime Minister Turnbull gets US backing

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The Obama administration has endorsed Malcolm Turnbull as Australian prime minister, seeking to quell concerns that he might pursue a different orientation towards the US anti-China “pivot to Asia” because of his emphasis on the importance of the world’s second largest economy for Australian business.

The endorsement came in the form of comments by the US ambassador to Australia, John Berry, reported today by *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist John Garnaut in an article headlined “US envoy: Malcolm Turnbull is our man.”

According to the report, Berry said Washington had “enormous confidence in the continuity of Australia’s military and intelligence policies” under Turnbull.

“It’s a story of rock-solid bipartisan support, on both sides of the Pacific, continuing from Abbott to Turnbull,” Berry said in an interview with the newspaper. “I only see hope, I don’t see any fear, and when I talk to everybody in Washington they’re all in absolute agreement.”

Questions have been raised that Turnbull might pursue a different tack in relation to the pivot because of his previous comments. In a speech following Obama’s official launching of the pivot from the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011, Turnbull warned that Australia had to be careful not to allow a “doe-eyed fascination” with the US to distract from the reality that Australia’s national interest required it to maintain an ally in Washington and a good friend in Beijing.

Last January, however, in a major speech in the US as moves were beginning against former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Turnbull pointedly emphasised the importance of the US pivot, signalling to Washington there would not be a foreign policy shift were he to become leader. At the same time, he has sought to

strengthen ties with China. On August 6, as the knives were being sharpened against Abbott, he delivered a major speech on relations with China which he began by emphasising that Australia and China were allies during World War II. Without the role of China in tying down Japanese forces, he said, “our war history may have ended very differently.”

In his interview, Berry sought to deflect criticisms that Turnbull’s new security team was inexperienced and might shift towards China at the expense of the United States.

“We categorically reject this false binary choice. We’re not asking Australia to make a choice,” he said, adding that China was Australia’s largest export market and America’s third-largest economic partner.

Some of the criticism of the cabinet has been directed to the relatively unknown New South Wales Liberal Senator Marise Payne as Australia’s first female defence minister. But Berry made clear the US was very supportive.

“We think Marise Payne is a very bold and innovative choice. People know her, they trust her, she is a careful person, she is a person of judgment, and so our side is glad to see this highly professional person with unquestioned integrity and critical skills in this field,” he said.

Such a ringing endorsement indicates that while her public profile may have been low to this point, Payne is well known in military circles, both in Australia and the US.

In comments last Tuesday, which were noted by the *Wall Street Journal*, Payne made clear the continuing support for the US pivot or “rebalance” as the Pentagon refers to it. She said her first priority in her new post would be to meet US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, Secretary of State John Kerry and that she and Turnbull

had also met with Ambassador Berry on Monday.

“That I hope reinforces for anyone who may have had an alternative view, that that is a key meeting for this government and for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of where we intend to take [foreign relations],” she said.

On Monday night, in his first major interview on the ABC’s program “7.30,” in response to a question on global security, Turnbull quickly turned to China’s disputes with neighbouring countries and its construction of facilities on shoals in the South China Sea.

He said it was important to ensure that the rise of China, which was not going to stop, is “conducted in a manner that does not disturb the security and relative harmony of the region upon which China’s prosperity depends.”

So far Turnbull has not expressed the view that China is an aggressive and expansionist power. But at the same time, he has made clear that he endorses the US pivot. In order to do that he criticised Chinese moves in the region as “counter-productive” to its own longer-term objectives.

“Pushing the envelope in the South China Sea has had the consequences of exactly the reverse ... of what China would seek to achieve,” he told “7.30.” “You would think that what China would seek to achieve is to create a sufficient feeling of trust and confidence among its neighbours that they no longer felt the need to have the US fleet and a strong US presence in the region. Now, what the island construction and all of the activity in the South China Sea has done has resulted in smaller countries surrounding that area ... turning to the United States even more than they did before.”

In fact, Turnbull’s presentation of events stands the situation on its head. It is not Chinese moves in the region, which have provoked the pivot but the reverse. With the coming to power of the Obama administration in 2009, following a decade of rapid Chinese growth—averaging more than 10 percent a year—the US recognised that the strategic situation had changed. South East Asian countries had become more closely integrated economically with China and it faced the risk of a political shift in the same direction.

Unable to respond economically, especially in the wake of the American-centred global financial crisis, the US has sought to redress the balance militarily. This

led to the pivot to Asia which is underpinned by a military build-up against China. As part of this strategy, the US intervened directly in the long-running border disputes between China and its neighbours—some of them stretching back to World War II—by stoking them up as a pretext for increasing its military presence and putting pressure on China.

Turnbull’s presentation of the situation is a historical falsification. But it serves a definite political purpose. It enables his government to support the US pivot and its stepped up military pressure, on the one hand while keeping aloof from the branding of China as aggressive on the other. Instead, Turnbull poses his criticism as “advice” to China on how it might better advance its own interests by ceasing “counter-productive” activities. This balancing act will come under mounting pressure as the US increases its military drive against China in which the Australian military is closely integrated.



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