

US president reproaches Australian PM over Darwin port deal

Peter Symonds
19 November 2015

During their first one-on-one meeting, in Manila yesterday, US President Obama privately rapped Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull over the knuckles for failing to provide Washington with advance notice that a Chinese corporation was to be awarded a 99-year lease to operate Darwin's commercial port last month.

The *Australian Financial Review* today reported being told by inside sources that Obama told Turnbull that the US should have been given a "heads up about these sort of things." While reportedly not insisting that the contract be revoked, the US president declared: "Let us know next time."

Obama's warning was issued in the context of discussions over the "threat" posed by China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea. The US escalated tensions by provocatively sending a US destroyer last month within the 12-nautical-mile limit of Chinese-claimed territory. On the eve of the current Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Manila, the Pentagon dispatched B-52 strategic bombers near Chinese islets in the South China Sea.

Turnbull told Obama that "we are very much of the same mind" on the South China Sea. Asked whether the Australian military would join the US in future challenges to Chinese territorial claims, he gave no definitive answer, saying only: "We will consider our position in respect of these matters with great care."

Australia is already heavily integrated into the US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region, aimed at preparing for war with China. The northern city of Darwin has become a key hub for US military operations following an agreement in 2011 to "rotate" up to 2,500 Marines there. B-52 bombers and other military aircraft are using Australian air bases near Darwin and the US navy has greater access.

Two US figures with close ties to the American military establishment this week strongly criticised the decision to award the Darwin port lease to the Chinese-owned Landbridge Group. Former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told the *Australian Financial Review*: "I couldn't believe that the Australian defence ministry went along with this... If the United States and Australia agreed to have more naval activities, the Darwin port would be the natural jumping off place. Not to mention we've got marines and exercises nearby."

Armitage declared that he was "further stunned to find out that apparently this did not come up in the AUSMIN talks [Australia-US Ministerial consultations]" last month.

While Armitage stopped short of calling for the lease to be torn up, Andrew Krepinevich from the Washington-based Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments bluntly commented in Tuesday's *Australian*: "The government still has an opportunity to reverse course and extricate itself from what stands as a major unforced error in what has become a long-term competition with China for positional advantage, with major implications for regional stability."

Krepinevich, a member of advisory boards for the US chief of naval operations and the army's special operations command, insinuated that failure to overturn the lease would damage ties. "Our alliance relationship is too important to treat casually," he warned.

These comments follow an escalating controversy within Australian political and strategic circles since the port deal was announced on October 14. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in Canberra has heavily criticised the lease, highlighting the connections of the Landbridge Group to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese Communist

Party.

Opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten jumped on the bandwagon, writing to Turnbull last Friday for an “urgent briefing” and to seek “reassurances regarding due diligence analysis that has been done on the national security risks” associated with the port deal.

In an interview in today’s *Australian*, Defence Department secretary Dennis Richardson emphatically defended the decision to give the green light to the Landbridge Group. “We and ASIO [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation] have looked very carefully at it from the point of view of espionage and issues of a security nature. We are at one in agreeing that this was not an investment that should be opposed on defence or security grounds... If we had the same issue before us tomorrow we would be making the same judgment.”

Richardson said the commercial port was a small part of Darwin harbour and that the Australian navy base was seven kilometres away. “The notion that the Chinese can establish a spy base there simply does not stand up to hard-headed scrutiny,” he commented. Richardson said he agreed with the comments of Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin who scathingly declared in a Senate committee that if monitoring ship movements were the issue, it would be easier “to sit at the fish and chip shop on the wharf” in Darwin harbour.

Richardson dismissed broader concerns that the Darwin lease was part of a Chinese plan to boost its strategic presence in the Asia Pacific. “The notion that this is part of what some people refer to as [China’s] ‘string of pearls’ to help fence off a major area of influence in the region is bizarre,” he declared.

Highlighting the extensive powers of the military, Richardson also pointed out that the Defence Act could be used in any crisis to take back control of Darwin port. “We can declare a contingency and the lessee can be directed to do what we require,” he said. Richardson acknowledged that Washington should have been told about the leasing arrangement in advance, but noted that Australia was not obliged to do so. “We are a sovereign country,” he said.

The criticisms to the deal being raised in Washington and Canberra underscore the degree to which Australia and its military are part of the Pentagon’s war plans. Indeed if conflict broke out between the US and China, Australian spy bases—along with military personnel and

hardware integrated into the US armed forces—would be automatically involved, regardless of what the government of the “sovereign country” decided.

US objections to the Landbridge Group lease are just the latest example of Washington’s opposition to Chinese involvement in what it regards as strategically sensitive projects and facilities in Australia. Under pressure from Washington, in 2011 the previous Labor government prevented the Chinese corporation Huawei Technologies from bidding on contracts for the Australian National Broadband Network. Last year the US attempted to stop Australia from joining China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank on the grounds that it would assist Beijing to extend its influence and strategic facilities in the region.

Top Australian officials such as Richardson, who could not remotely be considered anti-US or pro-China, are clearly exasperated by the criticisms stemming from Washington over China’s involvement in the Darwin port lease. Indeed, the objections only make sense in a virtual state of war, where military planners regard any “enemy” positions, particularly located in a close ally such as Australia, as a potential danger. From that standpoint, Washington’s reaction to the Darwin port lease is a telling indication of the advanced character of the US preparations for war against China.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact