

Australia: Labor Party attacks government over Chinese port contract

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The opposition Labor Party has stepped forward as the most vociferous critic of the conservative Coalition government's failure to consult with the Obama administration before a 99-year lease over Darwin's commercial port was granted to the Chinese-owned Landbridge Group.

Provocative claims have been made that Landbridge is a front for China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) because its owner is allegedly a former PLA officer and a member of the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

During last week's Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC) summit in Manila, Obama publicly reprimanded Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in the manner he would one of his staff. He lectured the Australian prime minister that the US should be given "a heads-up about these sort of things" and to "let us know next time."

Obama's attitude—that the Australian government is obliged to vet decisions about Chinese investment with Washington—has been completely embraced by Labor.

On November 19, Labor's treasury spokesman Chris Bowen complained that the lack of consultation meant "parties like the United States government were caught out on this."

Bill Shorten, Labor's leader, demanded the government provide "reassurances regarding the due diligence analysis that has been done on the national security risks." He stated: "There are serious concerns about the process which led to a vital asset being leased to a foreign company with links to a foreign military."

Yesterday, Anthony Albanese, a potential Labor leader-in-waiting, told journalists that Darwin's port was "an incredibly important strategic asset for our nation." He declared that it was "extraordinary that there was no heads-up given to our ally in the United States."

This display of subservience to Washington is in line with Labor's entire history and its actions while in government. In June 2010, Labor factional powerbrokers, identified in leaked US diplomatic cables as "protected sources" of the American embassy, ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister in large part due to his hesitation over fully supporting an increasingly confrontational US policy toward China. His replacement, Julia Gillard, presided over Australia's complete integration into the US "pivot to Asia," which aimed at compelling Beijing to submit to American geopolitical domination of the region.

Obama announced the "pivot" on the floor of the Australian parliament on November 17, 2011 and struck an agreement with Gillard to "rotate" thousands of American marines to the northern city of Darwin for six months of the year. US long-range bombers have increased their deployments to northern Australia. This has included not only B-52 bombers, but, for the first time ever, the virtually unreported landing of a B-2 "stealth" bomber in Darwin in December 2012. US warships are carrying out far more frequent visits to Darwin and other northern ports, with ongoing discussions taking place on whether the US Navy will "rotate" an aircraft carrier battlegroup in Perth or Brisbane, and base a marine naval taskforce in Darwin.

Tensions between the US and China have become extreme. Last month, the US military violated Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea, provocatively challenging Beijing to make a military response. Australia would immediately be at war with China in the event of any conflict, due to the US-Australia alliance; the complete integration of the Australian military with its American counterparts; and the critical US bases on Australian soil.

Within this context, the port contract has become a

matter of considerable contention.

On October 14, the Northern Territory government—following consultations with the federal government, the Defence Department and intelligence agencies—made what it considered at the time to be a purely commercial decision to accept a lucrative offer from Landbridge for the rights to operate Darwin port.

The contract was quickly enveloped in controversy. Within 24 hours of it being signed, the *Wall Street Journal* published the concerns of an unnamed “top military official” over a Chinese company having commercial control over a port that would be a key staging base for military operations in the event of war with China. The WSJ’s criticisms were followed by questions about the deal in the Australian parliament and condemnations by Peter Jennings and Geoff Wade, both leading analysts from the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

ASPI’s implications that the Chinese military could use Landbridge’s operation of Darwin port to “spy” on the US and Australia were ridiculed by Defence Force head Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin. He noted that satellites or someone “sitting on a stool at the fish and chip shop on the wharf” could monitor ships entering Darwin harbour.

The government nevertheless bowed to US and domestic political pressure, and announced a new security review of the Landbridge deal. It is facing demands in parliament to repudiate the agreement, despite the fact that contracts have been signed and payments made by Landbridge to the Northern Territory government.

Senator Clive Palmer, a right-wing mining magnate who is in a bitter legal battle with a Chinese state-owned corporation, joined Labor’s denunciations of the Turnbull government and called yesterday for the port to be compulsorily taken over, using wartime powers.

“The government should resume the port now,” Palmer declared. “Give the Chinese back their money and keep our faith with our American allies.” Landbridge’s control, he incredibly asserted, made it possible for the PLA to invade Australia! The Chinese military, he said, could just “sail up, unload your troops, [and] catch a bus to downtown Darwin.”

The paranoia over Chinese investment follows a concerted campaign by the Labor Party and the trade unions to stoke up opposition to the China-Australia

Free Trade Agreement, in part on “national security” grounds. In 2012, while Labor was in government, it rejected a contract bid for the national broadband network by Chinese company Huawei on the implicit grounds that it would allow access to Australian telecommunications to the Chinese military.

The conservative Liberal National Party coalition led by Turnbull has well and truly fallen into line with the anti-Chinese rhetoric. A bid by a Chinese company for massive Kidman cattle stations, which cover over 1 percent of the Australian continent, was rejected last week because one property adjoins the Woomera Air Force training range in South Australia. Media commentators have voiced “security concerns” over the multi-billion dollar bid for TransGrid, a state-owned electricity company being privatised in New South Wales, by a partnership of the State Grid Corporation of China and the Macquarie investment bank.

The ever more open anti-Chinese xenophobia reflects the commitment of the dominant sections of the ruling elite to the US alliance. The lies by Labor, the unions and the mass media that China represents a threat is a sinister attempt to undermine the opposition to US and Australian militarism and ideologically condition the population for war—a catastrophic prospect that looms ever larger as Washington proceeds with its reckless efforts to provoke a confrontation with Beijing.



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