

US pressures Australian government to toe the line on China

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The Obama administration is maintaining pressure on Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his Coalition government to fully line up with the US military build-up throughout Asia against China.

At last month's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila, in their first one-on-one encounter, Obama privately reprimanded Turnbull over the Australian decision to grant a 99-year lease to operate Darwin's commercial port to a Chinese corporation. The US should be given a "heads up about these sort of things," Obama reportedly said.

The northern city of Darwin is becoming transformed into a key hub for US military operations in Asia. A 2011 agreement allows for up to 2,500 Marines to "rotate" through Australian bases in the area, B-52 strategic bombers are already making operational flights to airfields near Darwin and US warships have also gained greater access.

Last Friday, the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) reported that senior Pentagon officials flew to Canberra in early November to hold "emergency talks" with their Australian counterparts over October's decision to lease the port to the Chinese-owned Landbridge Group. "It is understood that there have since been follow-up meetings, as the issues remain largely 'unresolved,'" the article stated.

According to the AFR, Washington was concerned that the Chinese company would "report back on everything" to Beijing. The US criticism was apparently directed at the International Policy Division within the Australian Department of Defence, in particular. Australian officials responded by saying "the Chinese would find out anyway."

Defence Department secretary Dennis Richardson has publicly defended giving the green light to the lease, pointing out that the agreement covers the

commercial port, not the navy base seven kilometres away. Speaking to the *Australian*, he said that both the Defence Department and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) agreed "that this was not an investment that should be opposed on defence or security grounds."

Treasurer Scott Morrison indicated in mid-November that the government was assessing options to strengthen its ability "to protect the national interest." Last Friday, he announced the appointment of former ASIO director-general David Irvine and ex-Rio Tinto Australia chief David Peever to the Foreign Investment Review Board, which oversees investment transactions. Both Irvine and Peever have longstanding connections to the military and intelligence apparatus.

The ructions caused by the Darwin port decision highlight again the fundamental dilemma confronting the Australian ruling class, which is heavily dependent economically on its largest trading partner China, but relies strategically on its long-established military alliance with the United States. The difficulties have only become more acute as the US has ramped up the "pivot to Asia," aimed at undermining China diplomatically and economically as well as militarily preparing for war.

In June 2010, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd became a political casualty after he called on the US to reach an accommodation with China, right at the point when Obama was preparing for confrontation. Rudd was removed in an inner-party coup orchestrated by a handful of party and trade union powerbrokers with close connections to Washington.

Turnbull, who ousted Tony Abbott as Liberal Party leader and prime minister in mid-September, has in the past evinced a similar attitude to that of Rudd. A former investment banker with ties to China, Turnbull warned

in 2011 that “our national interest requires us truly (and not just rhetorically) to maintain both an ally in Washington and a good friend in Beijing.”

However, as he prepared to challenge Abbott, Turnbull delivered a speech to the US-Australia Dialogue in Los Angeles in January, in which he pledged his support for the “pivot” as a “vitally important stabilising, reassuring factor in the peaceful development of our region.”

Undoubtedly concerns remain in Washington about Turnbull’s willingness to act as aggressively as Abbott did on behalf of the US, not only in Asia but internationally. While completely committed to the US alliance, Turnbull has indicated a different emphasis by appointing Martin Parkinson to head the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

In a lecture last week, Parkinson, a former Treasury head, called for the US to accommodate to a rising China with more combined US-Chinese leadership. Criticising inconsistent US diplomacy in Asia, he said: “When the US was the world’s indispensable power, such an approach carried limited costs for sustained US influence. That world, though, is rapidly receding.”

The misgivings in Washington will only have been heightened by the Darwin port decision, as well as the apparent reluctance of Canberra to join Washington in directly challenging Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. From the beginning of the year, the US has mounted an increasingly strident campaign against Chinese land reclamation on islets under its administration. In October, the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, deliberately sailed within the 12-nautical-mile limit surrounding one of China’s reefs, risking an encounter with the Chinese military.

Last Friday’s AFR noted that US officials last month “expressed concerns over Australia’s lack of interest in sending naval ships to join Washington’s so-called ‘freedom of navigation’ operations in the South China Sea.” When questioned at the APEC summit in Manila, Turnbull did not commit to a joint exercise, saying only that he “would consider our position in respect of all of these matters with great care.”

In an interview on the ABC’s “7.30” program on November 26, Turnbull played down the significance of the South China Sea disputes. While noting that there were “issues” between the US and China, as well as China’s neighbours, over atoll-building, he stressed

that “overall all of those countries have much more in common” and declared: “It’s a mistake, if I may say so, to focus solely on the points of difference.”

Washington, however, is clearly determined to make its aggressive operations in the South China Sea a regular occurrence and wants its allies and partners to participate. The Australian military, which has participated in every US-led war in Asia, as well as invasions in Afghanistan and the Middle East, is an obvious choice. Other allies either lack the capability, or, as in the case of any Japanese involvement, run the risk of being so provocative as to lead to a military clash.

As a consequence, the US is unlikely to take no for an answer from Canberra and will only intensify the pressure on the Turnbull government to agree. Even more so than the decision over the Darwin port, Washington’s demands for participation in its naval provocations against China will exacerbate divisions not only in the government, but within the political, foreign policy and defence establishment as a whole.



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