

Labor Party in Australia demands “action” against China

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The Labor Party’s shadow defence spokesman, Stephen Conroy, was provided space in today’s *Australian* to criticise the Turnbull government for being “long on rhetoric and short on substance” in its support for US provocations against China. Conroy advocates a highly visible “freedom of navigation” operation by the Australian military that directly challenges Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Conroy declares that the competing claims in the South China Sea “have led to heightened regional tensions and a worrying disregard for international law and norms.” While paying lip service to the fact that all claimants—including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Taiwan—have made efforts to cement their holds on tiny islets and reefs, Conroy indicts China as the greatest threat to what he labels the “international system.”

Conroy reiterates his “strong support” for the Pentagon’s decision last October to send the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit of a Chinese-administered islet—a reckless move that threatened conflict.

Australia, Conroy asserts, has an “obligation to act in support of international law and norms in the South China Sea.” He criticises the Turnbull government for downplaying “any role for Australia” and insists that Australia “should not be shy about our actions and intentions.” Conroy concludes that “those looking for signs that Turnbull is prepared to match his words with action to uphold the rules-based order in the South China Sea would have been sorely disappointed.”

Headlined, “We should assist in policing the South China Sea,” Conroy’s column was endorsed in a front-page comment by Greg Sheridan, the *Australian’s*

foreign editor, a vociferous supporter of the US “pivot to Asia” and military build-up in the region. Sheridan describes Conroy’s comment as “a bold call” that could put Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull “under some pressure from those within his own party who would like Canberra to conduct a freedom of navigation exercise.” Sheridan alleges that “a number of South East Asian nations privately feel that it would be beneficial” for Australia to conduct such an operation.

Conroy’s column was published barely 24 hours after Turnbull completed his first visit to Washington as prime minister, where he held a series of high-level talks with President Barack Obama, intelligence officials and American business heads. While Turnbull has earned general praise for stressing Canberra’s alignment with the US—including in a separate comment today by Sheridan—Conroy’s column suggests that he did not go far enough. In other words, to satisfy Washington and the pro-US constituency within Australia, Turnbull’s government must, by its actions, demonstrate its willingness to risk war with China, Australia’s largest trading partner.

Conroy’s demand that Australia carry out an operation that could lead to a direct clash with the Chinese military serves to underscore the role of the Labor Party as the most fervent supporter of the US-Australia alliance and, over recent years, the most reckless advocate of Australia’s involvement in the escalating US-led operations to destabilise and undermine China.

Labor silenced any critics of the US alliance and US militarism within its ranks more than four decades ago. During the 1980s, the Labor government of Bob Hawke supported every US intrigue and intervention around the world. In 1991, Hawke was the first world leader to commit troops to the US invasion of Iraq.

Labor and the trade unions are riddled with what the US embassy calls its “protected sources” and “assets.” In June 2010, a cabal of such “assets” in the Labor and union leadership ousted Kevin Rudd as Labor leader and prime minister. Rudd was removed because, while stressing his support for the US alliance, he insisted that Washington had to concede greater regional and international influence to Beijing in order to avoid war.

With the installation of Julia Gillard as prime minister, Australian foreign and defence policy was fashioned into unconditional support for confrontation with China. Australia’s role in US strategic planning was highlighted by Obama’s decision to formally announce the “pivot” on the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011.

Some four years later, Australia is fully integrated into US war plans and preparations. The US military makes regular use of ports, airfields and training areas across northern and western Australia, while communications and spying bases at Pine Gap, North West Cape and Canberra have been substantially upgraded.

A 2015 study described Pine Gap as the CIA’s “most important technical intelligence collection station in the world.” It also processes communication intercepts across the Middle East and Central Asia that are used to identify targets for drone assassinations and would be used to target conventional and nuclear attacks on mainland China.

The Australian military is being equipped with over \$100 billion worth of F-35 jet fighters and new submarines and amphibious assault ships so it can function as a credible partner for US forces.

The orientation set in motion under Gillard has been maintained throughout all the political turbulence and changes in prime ministers and governments in Australia over the past five years. Rudd renounced his former positions in order to regain Washington’s trust and briefly return as prime minister in 2013, before losing an election to the conservative parties led by Tony Abbott. To ensure his acceptability in Washington, Turnbull, who ousted Abbott in an inner-party coup last September, publicly revised his previous criticisms of the “pivot” in 2011 and 2012, and made clear his acceptance of the US stance.

The publication and endorsement of Conroy’s views by the *Australian* is nevertheless a warning to Turnbull.

His previous hesitations about the pivot have not been forgotten. If he baulked in any way at a direct US request to conduct a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea, he would face destabilisation and, possibly, a shift by the Murdoch media empire to support the return of Labor to office in the federal election that the government must call sometime this year.

Labor’s demand that Australia launch a military provocation against China is also a stark warning to the working class. It indicates that such an operation is under discussion and may be ordered in the near future. Behind the backs of the Australian population, the Australian ruling elite is contemplating decisions that could result in war.



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