

Australian prime minister visits US military commander in Hawaii

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On his way back from his first trip to Washington as Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull stopped in Hawaii on Wednesday for talks with the head of US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, they discussed the maritime territorial disputes between China and its Asian neighbours. Turnbull also visited the Pearl Harbor base and inspected the USS Preble, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, accompanied by high-level US officers.

No official explanation has been provided as to why Turnbull felt the need to hold discussions with Admiral Harris, an increasingly prominent military figure. After all, the prime minister had just held meetings over two days with US President Barack Obama, the civilian commander-in-chief, and US Defense Secretary Ash Carter, the civilian head of the defense department, as well as with Democrat and Republican political leaders, intelligence chiefs and business executives.

Turnbull evidently wanted to draw attention to his Pearl Harbor visit to underscore his commitment to the US alliance. He tweeted two photographs of himself with Harris and US naval commanders. One was captioned: “In Honolulu with Admiral Harry Harris, Commander US Pacific Command, discussing maritime security in the West Pacific.” The other said: “At Pearl Harbor this morning with Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery & the Commander of USS Preble, Jeffrey L. Heames.”

No briefings emerged from the talks, but the US Pacific Command issued a statement about Harris’s meeting with Turnbull. “Over breakfast, the leaders discussed the alliance, regional security issues, and Australia’s key role in the US strategic rebalance to the Indo-Asia-Pacific,” it said. “They also discussed ways to deepen cooperation in maintaining the rules-based

order in which all countries can prosper and pursue their interests peacefully according to international law.”

The reference to “leaders” itself points to Harris’s elevation, as a military officer, to the status of a significant political figure.

Over the past year, the admiral has played a vocal role in inflaming tensions with China, particularly over its territorial claims and island reclamation operations in the South China Sea. During a trip to Beijing last November, he provocatively warned his hosts that the US military would “continue to fly, sail and operate whenever and wherever international law allows. The South China Sea is not—and will not—be an exception.”

For much of 2015, Harris pressed for Obama to authorise “freedom of navigation” operations within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-controlled reefs. In March, speaking in Canberra, the admiral implied that China’s land reclamation activities in the region posed a threat, describing it as creating “a great wall of sand.”

Last October 27, the USS Lassen, a guided missile destroyer, intruded within the 12-mile limit surrounding at least one Chinese-administered islet in the Spratly Islands. This deliberate violation of Chinese territorial claims had nothing to do with “freedom of navigation” or “upholding international law.” It marked an escalation of the Obama administration’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia—an all-encompassing diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at isolating China and subordinating it to US interests, by war if necessary.

On January 15, just days before hosting Turnbull, the admiral delivered another belligerent speech, thanking local Hawaiian officials for their contribution to the “rebalance.” After emphasising Hawaii’s role as the

cockpit of the Pentagon's plans to base 60 percent of US military forces in the Asia Pacific region, Harris accused China of "aggressive actions in the South China Sea" as well as "disturbing rhetoric about restricting freedom of navigation."

Beijing has repeatedly denied any intention to interfere with shipping through the sea, through which much of China's trade passes. But a central component of the Pentagon's war plans against China is to ensure control of strategic waterways so as to mount an economic blockade of, as well as offensive military operations against, the Chinese mainland.

Harris declared that China's actions, plus "the ambiguity surrounding its military strategy" were "causing great concern throughout the theater"—thus nominating the region as a potential theater of war. He also referred to Australia as a "staunch ally" that was "critical to our theater strategy."

Harris said "the Rebalance is reassuring our allies and partners, and the Rebalance is enabling us to grow new partnerships with nations like India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam and many more." These partners were working with the US to "reject coercive attempts to undermine the security architecture in the region."

Reiterating the importance of Australia to this line-up, the admiral added an aggressive reference to the US Marines currently rotating annually through the strategic northern Australian port of Darwin. "They say that Australia is home to 9 of the 10 most dangerous creatures on the planet," Harris said, "and now that we have over 1,200 Devil Dogs in Darwin, Australia has all 10!" This Marine force is due to increase to 2,500 troops by next year.

In Washington, Turnbull reaffirmed his government's commitment to the Obama administration's military build-up against China, as well as the US-led war in Iraq and Syria. He also used a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a prominent US government-backed think tank, to warn that China must stop construction on the islands and reefs it controls in the South China Sea and "refrain from militarisation." He called on "all parties" in the territorial disputes to do the same, but his comments were clearly directed against China, echoing a standard line from Washington.

If Australia were to openly join the US in conducting

"freedom of navigation" operations through Chinese-claimed territories in the South China Sea, that would enable Washington to depict its confrontational approach as a regional one, not purely a US initiative.

The *Australian Financial Review's* North American correspondent John Kehoe reported that when Turnbull met Obama and Pentagon officials in Washington, "it is understood he did not receive a request for Australia to physically participate in future freedom of navigation exercise[s]," but "a range of possible other tactics were broached."

Kehoe said the Turnbull government also planned to "continue to speak out publicly against China's aggressive reclamation efforts," despite being "reluctant to confront Beijing directly in a freedom of navigation exercise, partly because China is Australia's largest trading partner."

An editorial in yesterday's *Australian* endorsed Turnbull's "delicate" stance, reflecting Australian capitalism's heavy dependence on exports of raw materials to China. It differed with a call by the Labor Party's defence spokesman Stephen Conroy for Australia to mount its own military operations in Chinese-claimed areas.

In this context, Turnbull's visit to Hawaii for talks with Admiral Harris is another warning sign of intensifying US plans to confront China, with the Australian population placed on the front line of any military conflict.



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