

Ex-Australian PM calls for “freedom of navigation” challenge to China

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Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott delivered a speech last Friday in Tokyo calling on current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to directly challenge China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea by sending a warship or military aircraft within the 12-nautical-mile limit surrounding one of its islets.

Abbott, who was ousted by Turnbull last September in an inner party coup, has clearly not shelved his ambitions to retake the Liberal Party leadership. Underpinning this rivalry are ongoing divisions within the Liberals and the political establishment more broadly about how to balance between Australia’s longstanding military ally, the United States, and its largest trading partner, China.

While both men are fully committed to the US-Australian alliance, Abbott very aggressively backed the renewed US war in the Middle East, its confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, and above all its “pivot to Asia” and military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China. Turnbull, a former investment banker with connections in China, was critical of the “pivot” when announced by Obama in the Australian parliament in 2011. He only signalled his support for the confrontational US strategy last year as he prepared his challenge for the leadership.

Abbott told his audience in Tokyo that China shared economic interests with Australia, but unlike Japan, did not share democratic values. “We are not entirely confident,” he declared, “that when China’s interests differ from Australia’s, there is a shared set of values that will allow a mutually satisfactory outcome.”

He repeated Washington’s mantra of calling on China to “better appreciate the rules-based international order” that had brought stability to Asia. The “rules-based global order” is, of course, the one dominated by US imperialism, in which the rules are set in

Washington. The purpose of the “pivot” is to ensure that China is subordinated to this international system, by military means if need be.

Abbott identified the South China Sea as “a potential flash point” and echoed Washington’s year-long campaign against China’s land reclamation and “militarisation.” Without naming China, the former prime minister condemned “countries which turn reefs into artificial islands at massive environmental cost, fortify disputed territory and try to restrict freedom of navigation,” putting stability and security at risk.

Abbott noted that Australia had “quietly increased our own air and naval patrols in the South China Sea.” He added: “We should be prepared to exercise our rights to freedom of navigation wherever the international law allows because this is not something that the United States should have to police alone.”

Abbott’s comments came in the wake of mounting demands in Canberra and Washington for the Turnbull government to give the green light for a so-called freedom of navigation operation. The US navy has already carried out two such patrols, most recently in January, when the destroyer, the USS Curtis Wilbur, provocatively sailed within the 12-nautical-mile territorial zone around Chinese-administered Triton Island.

During a press conference in Washington last week, Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, specifically appealed for “like-minded” nations to carry out “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea. While not specifically named, Australia would be at the top of the admiral’s list. Following his first visit to Washington as prime minister in late January, Turnbull stopped off in Hawaii for discussions with Harris, in which the issue was undoubtedly raised.

The Turnbull government is also under pressure from the opposition Labor Party to stage a military intrusion into Chinese-claimed territory. Labor defence spokesman Stephen Conroy called on the government last month “to stand up and demonstrate that they are not prepared to be bullied by China.” The previous Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard stood fully behind the “pivot,” signing the initial deal with Obama in 2011 to “rotate” up to 2,500 US Marines through the northern city of Darwin.

The other focus of Abbott’s speech last week was the growing strategic relations with Japan—a partnership that Washington has encouraged between its two key allies in its military expansion in Asia. Abbott, who once described Japan as “Australia’s best friend in Asia,” applauded the recent decision of the Australian and Japanese governments to upgrade relations to a “special partnership.”

Abbott went out of his way to cover up the Japanese government’s accelerating efforts to remilitarise, remove constitutional restrictions on military operations and whitewash the war crimes of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s. Referring to Germany and Japan, he said both “have been exemplary international citizens in the years since [World War II] and have shown not the slightest tendency to militarism or expansionism.”

In fact, both Germany and Japan are remilitarising. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan’s military budget has continuously expanded and new “collective self-defence” laws were rammed through parliament last year, allowing Japan to engage in US-led wars. Far from atoning for the past, the Abe government has downplayed or denied past Japanese atrocities.

Abbott hailed Japan’s willingness to share its sophisticated submarine technology with Australia and all but declared that Tokyo’s bid to build 12 submarines for the Australian navy should prevail over rival German and French bids. “For Japan, this submarine deal is strategic; for the other bidders, it’s commercial,” he said. In other words, the deal would cement a strategic partnership involving not just Japan and Australia, but also the US, as the war drive against China intensifies.

Back in Australia, Abbott has criticised the Defence White Paper released by the Turnbull government last week for extending the time for the delivery of the

submarines to the early 2030s—from the mid-2020s projected by his government. “I’m not just disappointed, I’m flabbergasted at this decision,” he told today’s *Australian*, raising doubts about the viability of extending the life of the present Collins class submarines.

The article’s author, the *Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, is well connected in Washington. He cited unnamed sources who were similarly concerned that “the new defence spending promised in the Turnbull government’s white paper is heavily focussed on the distant future.” The real source of the criticism is without a doubt the Pentagon, which is determined to ensure that its main allies are well equipped for a war with China, and not in the distant future.

Abbott, who is now on the parliamentary backbench, along with some of his former senior ministers, is clearly positioning himself for a future challenge for the Liberal Party leadership. Turnbull is not only under pressure over military matters, but is under fire from big business and the financial media for failing to take steps to make deep cutbacks to social spending. Yesterday Abbott also called on the government in a Liberal Party room meeting “to take on the savings challenge again.”

Abbott’s public support for the military demands coming from Washington will not be lost on Turnbull. In June 2010, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted by his deputy, Julia Gillard, in an overnight inner-party coup orchestrated by a handful of Labor and union powerbrokers, later identified via WikiLeaks as “protected sources” of the US embassy in Canberra. Rudd’s “crime” in Washington’s eyes was to appeal for the US to accommodate to China, right at the point when Obama was preparing the “pivot” to confront Beijing.

While the US role in Rudd’s ouster is never spoken of publicly, Turnbull is certainly aware that his grip on office depends in no small measure on continued support from Washington.



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