

Australian PM treads a fine line on foreign policy

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Just two days after setting up the trigger for an early election, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last night delivered the annual Lowy Lecture to an audience in Sydney at the Lowy Institute—a key foreign and strategic policy think tank.

Turnbull's first major foreign policy speech as prime minister will be closely scrutinised not only in Canberra but also in Washington, which is placing growing pressure on the Australian government to expand its commitment to the US "pivot to Asia" and military build-up throughout the region against China.

In delivering the Lowy Lecture, Turnbull was walking a fine line: demonstrating his support for the Australian alliance with the United States while advocating that the country take full advantage of new and developing economic opportunities in Asia. The two policies, however, are at odds with each other, because Washington's confrontational "pivot" threatens to undermine Australia's relations with China, its largest trading partner.

Turnbull began his speech by condemning the latest terrorist attack in Brussels, using it to reaffirm his support for the "war on terror" and Australian involvement in the US-led wars in Iraq and Syria. For more than two decades, Canberra's backing for Washington's neo-colonial operations in the Middle East has been the quid pro quo for US support for Australian interests in the Asian Pacific.

Turning to Asia, the prime minister repeated what has become a familiar line: "these are extraordinary times, exciting times" in which Australian businesses must seize the opportunities "in the fastest growing region of the world." He painted a fanciful picture of the "next wave of growth in Asia ... [that] promises to be every bit as spectacular as the one that we've experienced."

China, Turnbull declared, was "managing a difficult transition" to a consumer-based economy, but the expansion of the Chinese middle class offered "enormous opportunities ... right across the [Australian] economy, for services, soft commodities." He emphasised the bright prospects that had opened up for Australian businesses due to the recent free

trade agreement (FTA) with China. The economic rise of India offered "another historic opportunity that we must seize," he enthused, while "no part of the regional transformation is more exciting to me than the one taking place right here on our doorstep" in Indonesia.

These rosy scenarios bear no relation to the realities of the deepening global economic breakdown, from which Asia is not excluded. Slump and recession in the US, Europe and Japan have hit China's export-dependent economy and its continuing slowdown is impacting on countries throughout the region and globally, including Australia.

Turnbull's call to "seize opportunities" comes at the direct expense of the working class. "If we are to make the most of these exciting opportunities in Asia, we first need to ensure we are resilient and agile at home," he declared. By becoming more "agile," Turnbull has in mind a marked acceleration of the corporate agenda of pro-market restructuring and austerity, at a time when his government is increasingly under fire from business leaders and commentators for failing to implement.

Indeed, in what is an election year, Turnbull has taken the unusual step of threatening to trigger an early "double dissolution" election for all seats in both houses of parliament. The very measure that he has chosen as the trigger for the poll—legislation to re-establish a regulatory body with draconian powers against construction workers—indicates the broader anti-working class agenda that his government intends to carry out after the election.

Having outlined the rosy prospects for Australian business in Asia, Turnbull attempted to answer his domestic foreign policy critics, including the opposition Labor Party and former prime minister Tony Abbott, who was ousted by Turnbull last September. Both have argued for a tougher line against alleged Chinese "expansionism," especially in the South China Sea.

Turnbull reiterated his commitment to the "rules-based system" based on the United States and its post World War II alliances, which have underpinned "peace and prosperity" in the Asia Pacific region. He highlighted his government's

recent Defence White Paper and its objectives of not only defending Australia, but “supporting the security of maritime South East Asia and the South Pacific.”

Like the Obama administration, Turnbull blamed China’s actions in the South China Sea for “creating anxieties and raising tensions among its neighbours” and again warned that they were “counterproductive, regardless of the legal merits.” While saying that Australia had no opinion on the territorial disputes between China and its neighbours, he nevertheless “looked forward” to the outcome of the Philippine case in the international court in The Hague—a case supported and assisted by Washington to undermine China’s claims. Turnbull also emphasised Australia’s developing defence partnership with Japan and strategic cooperation with India—ties that have been pushed by the United States as the cornerstones of its preparations for war against China.

For all Washington’s criticisms of China’s military activities, it is the US “pivot to Asia” that, over the past five years, has generated enormous tensions throughout the Indo-Pacific region. By sending US navy destroyers within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-administered islets in the South China Sea last October and again in January, Washington is risking a potentially catastrophic conflict with China.

Significantly Turnbull made no reference to ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea—the pretext for the Pentagon’s provocative operations—even though he is well aware that Washington is pressing his government to follow suit.

Turnbull’s failure, to date, to authorise a “freedom of navigation” operation could become an election issue. In what can only be interpreted as a warning to Turnbull, Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of Murdoch’s *Australian*, declared last Saturday that Labor had “won the battle on the defence policy front.” Sheridan, who is very well connected in US foreign policy and military circles, praised Labor’s defence spokesman Stephen Conroy for his advocacy of a challenge to China in the South China Sea, and branded the government as “timid and close to deceitful.”

Sheridan also highlighted another of Washington’s bones of contention—the leasing of the port of Darwin to a Chinese company, which the US has implied will allow China to spy on the American military based in the northern city. Conroy, he declared, had forced significant policy changes by initiating a parliamentary inquiry. “This whole matter has deeply embarrassed the government and driven [defence minister Marise] Payne ever deeper into hiding.”

Behind the Turnbull government’s reticence to act in the South China Sea lies the fundamental dilemma confronting Australian imperialism, which has depended on its longstanding military alliance with the US to pursue its

interests in Asia and globally, but is reliant on China as its top trade partner. Mounting a “freedom of navigation” operation in the South China Sea, even with US backing, could result in economic retaliation by Beijing, or worse, a clash that leads to a wider conflict.

Turnbull is also well aware that Kevin Rudd, the last Australian prime minister to advocate a foreign policy initiative that was at odds with Washington’s interests, was ousted in June 2010 in a party room coup orchestrated by a handful of Labor powerbrokers, revealed by WikiLeaks to be “protected sources” of the US embassy in Canberra. Rudd’s “crime” was to call on the Obama administration to reach an accommodation with China in the Asia Pacific, right at the point when the White House was preparing its confrontational “pivot.”

Turnbull, a merchant banker with connections in China, was critical of Rudd’s replacement, Julia Gillard, when she transformed the Australian parliament into a platform for Obama to formally announce the “pivot to Asia” in November 2011. He warned against a “doe-eyed fascination with the leader of the free world” and declared, not unlike Rudd, that “the best and most realistic strategic outcome for East Asia must be one in which the powers are in balance, each side effectively able to deny the domination of the other.”

Last January, however, as he prepared to challenge Abbott, Turnbull shelved his previous criticisms and pledged his support to the “pivot”—a US strategy which is aimed not at a balance in Asia, but American hegemony. Since taking over in September, he has supported, in words, all of the US actions including its “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea. Now his government is coming under mounting pressure to replace words with action, and all the dangers that entails.

A hint that he would not necessarily bow to US demands came at the end of Turnbull’s speech when he declared: “The new and more complex economic landscape emerging in China and across the rest of Asia will require more focus and hard work. The same is true for our strategic environment, which is becoming more complex. In both the economic and security realms we have to be agile and resilient and above all very clear-eyed. This is a time for very keen focus on our national interest.”

This is unlikely to be a signal that will be well received in Washington.



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