

# Australian prime minister skirts controversy in China

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16 April 2016

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull concluded his two-day visit to China last night without causing any diplomatic controversy with Australia's largest export market and trading partner. He gave a public speech on Thursday followed by a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and some two hours of talks yesterday with President Xi Jinping. Turnbull carefully avoided any contentious public remarks on the US-China confrontation in the South China Sea, tensions on the Korean peninsula, or the US, European and Australian allegations of Chinese dumping of steel on world markets.

Instead, Turnbull smiled a great deal and talked about future business prospects and an Australian rules football game to be played in Shanghai within the next several years. His "strategic dialogue" visit coincided with the "Australia in China Week," which this year involved dozens of events in 12 major Chinese cities. Australian corporations sought out new contracts and markets, particularly in areas of possible opportunities under the terms of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement signed last December. On Thursday, Turnbull addressed some 1,800 Australian and Chinese guests at a lunch in Shanghai, where he lauded China's growth and development, the efforts of the Beijing regime to "transition" to a "consumption-driven" economy, and the opening of "doors" for Australian companies.

Over 1,000 Australian business figures, two state government premiers, the federal trade minister and an array of diplomats travelled to China for the events—the largest-ever contingent. Annual Australian-Chinese trade, while it has begun to contract in the past several years, still stands at over \$155 billion per year, with Australia reaping a major trade surplus, above all from its exports of raw materials.

The term "walking a fine line" is scarcely adequate to describe Turnbull's performance. His trip to China took place under radically different conditions from even those of the 2014 visit by Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull ousted as prime minister in a factional coup last September. Since Turnbull was installed, the US has dramatically heightened military tensions with China by deploying warships—firstly in October and again in January—in "freedom of navigation operations" inside the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-held islets in the South China Sea.

The US provocations are aimed at sending a clear signal to Beijing that Washington is prepared to use Chinese territorial claims as the pretext for full-scale war. Since the launch of the US "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia in 2011, the United States has been concentrating 60 percent of its air and naval power in the region, strengthening alliances and military relations and establishing new bases in a ring around the South China Sea.

Carefully-placed comments in the state-owned Chinese media, such as the *China Daily* and *Global Times*, indicated that Beijing could take reprisals over any public statements by Turnbull that indicated support for US actions and condemned China.

The underlying tensions were highlighted by the fact that while the Australian prime minister smiled for photos yesterday alongside President Xi, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, the representative of Australia's most critical strategic ally, was on board the aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis, in the South China Sea criticising Chinese activities in the region. (See: "US defence secretary sends menacing message to China")

It is entirely possible that some of the hundreds of Australian military personnel currently "on exchange"

with US forces were on board the carrier or one of the American warships accompanying it. In any conflict with China, US satellite and communications bases in Australia would play a crucial role in American operations and, under the terms of the Australia New Zealand United States (ANZUS) alliance, Washington would expect direct Australian military involvement.

Via comments on Friday to Australian journalists, Turnbull publicly assured Washington and his domestic Australian foreign policy critics that he privately raised “concerns” with Xi over the South China Sea and urged China to “show restraint.”

The US has signaled it wants far more from its Australian ally, however. Led by Pacific Command head Admiral Harry Harris, American military commanders have made statements leaving no doubt they want the Australian Navy to conduct its own “freedom of navigation” operations in Chinese-claimed territory to demonstrate that the US is not acting alone. Australia’s opposition Labor Party has endorsed the US calls and demanded that Turnbull “stand up” to China and order a military deployment that could lead to a confrontation with Chinese forces.

Some media coverage in Australia played up Turnbull’s purported “private” remarks as a firm stand against China, in line with US expectations. A palpable air of relief at his purported tact pervaded other commentary, however, most significantly from two of the most vociferous advocates of the US “pivot” and anti-China hawks.

Greg Sheridan, the international editor of the *Australian*, who regularly denounces alleged Chinese “expansionism” and “aggression,” wrote a lengthy justification for Turnbull’s avoidance of controversy. He declared: “Any Australian government is going to recognise the depth of Australian interests involved.” Sheridan concluded: “Lots of difficulties lie in store for us in the South China Sea. We can’t avoid these difficulties. All we can do is manage them in our own interests as well as possible.”

*Sydney Morning Herald* political editor Peter Hartcher, who has previously demanded that Australian leaders publicly label Beijing as “fascist” and treat it as such, likewise praised Turnbull’s diplomacy. He wrote, “A little Australian posturing that plays up the image of a great and powerful China is really no bother at all.”

Such comments only underscore the concerns in

Australian establishment circles over just how acute and dangerous the situation in the Asia-Pacific has become. Some four-and-a-half years after the “pivot” was formally announced, US imperialism is recklessly escalating provocations that could trigger a catastrophic war in which successive Australian governments have assured Washington they will serve as a military partner, and “southern anchor” and base of operations, for American forces.

The objective dilemma facing the Australian ruling elite, between its historical alliance with the US and its economic interests and ambitions in China, will only grow more acute in the coming period.



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