

Why the South China Sea tensions were removed from Australian Greens' speech

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On Wednesday, Greens leader Richard Di Natale delivered a foreign policy speech to the Lowy Institute think tank in which he made criticisms of the US-Australia alliance and called for a more “independent” Australian foreign policy. As the WSWWS noted on May 18, there were substantial discrepancies between the speech Di Natale delivered, and the preview of his remarks in the Murdoch and Fairfax press earlier that day.

A review of the initial version of Di Natale's speech, which his office had sent to the *Australian* and other media outlets, underscores that the changes to the speech were of considerable political significance.

The Greens leader removed any reference to the mounting tensions in the South China Sea, and any remarks that would have drawn attention to Australia's integration into the growing US confrontation with China on the economic, military and ideological fronts. The Greens made a conscious decision that their leader would not challenge either of the major parties, Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, or the Obama administration, over policies that are threatening to provoke a war with China.

On the tensions in the South China Sea, the earlier version of Di Natale's speech contained the following passage: “Australia is rapidly escalating our military technology so as to join and contribute to a regional arms race, interceding in a South China Sea proxy war between our two largest trading partners over 4,000 kilometres from our shores, all without diplomatic efforts having even gotten out of first gear.”

By the time Di Natale mounted the rostrum at the Lowy Institute, this passage had been removed entirely.

Over the past 12 months, the US and its allies, including Australia, have ramped-up their campaign against China over longstanding territorial disputes in

the South China Sea. Last week, the US military conducted its third “freedom of navigation” incursion into Chinese-claimed territory in the Sea, provoking the Chinese military to scramble jet fighters and deploy warships.

A report released by the Pentagon this week made clear that the US is planning to escalate its military forays into Chinese territory, in a bid to provoke even more bellicose responses from the Chinese military. This reckless policy has the full backing of both the Liberal-Nationals and the Labor Party.

The Coalition government of Malcolm Turnbull has repeatedly declared its support for the US provocations and indicated that it asserts the right of Australia to conduct its own “freedom of navigation” operations. The Labor Party has been even more aggressive, with shadow defence minister Stephen Conroy denouncing Turnbull for not immediately ordering Australian warships and aircraft into Chinese-claimed territory.

Di Natale's silence is a signal that the Greens will not speak out as the war dangers grow in the South China Sea and will not oppose direct Australian intervention into the conflict.

On the economic front, the earlier version of Di Natale's speech had denounced “the dogged pursuit of the US-backed Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement by the Abbott-Turnbull government—and backed by the Labor Party...” The Greens leader was to say: “With the potentially massive cost to Australia of investor-state dispute settlement provisions, it is clear that this deal doesn't benefit Australian's at all.”

All references to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) were deleted from the speech that Di Natale ultimately delivered.

The investor-state dispute settlement provisions are a draconian clause of the TPP that allows corporations to

sue governments on the grounds that state policies have hindered investment and business operations. More importantly, the TPP is not a trade agreement. It is an economic bloc dominated by the US and explicitly directed against China. US President Barack Obama made this clear last year, declaring “we can’t let countries like China write the rules of the global economy. We should write those rules.”

The omission of the TPP from Di Natale’s remarks are in line with the support for the US trade war agenda by the dominant factions of the Australian political and corporate establishment.

Most significantly, Di Natale’s speech was edited to remove sentences and expressions that undermined, or even mildly questioned, the underlying ideological justification of the US “pivot to Asia”—that China is an “aggressive” and “expansionist” threat.

In the draft speech, the Greens leader was to state that the massive military procurement program outlined by the Liberal-National government and supported by Labor—which includes over \$50 billion allocated to the purchase of 12 potentially nuclear submarines and \$17 billion for F-35 Joint Strike Fighters—was being carried out “in the absence of an increase in direct threats to Australia.”

Later on, Di Natale was to state that that the “Greens believe we need a defence force that protects Australia, not one that exists to play gate-keeper between two regional powers.”

Both these comments were deleted. Instead, Di Natale claimed that the military spending was merely an “industry policy.” He followed this with populist rhetoric about reallocating funding to health, education and climate change policies. The Greens apparently decided that the remarks in the initial version of the speech came too close to the great unmentionable of Australian politics—that the build-up of the armed forces is aimed at preparing for war with China.

At the same time, the reference in the draft to the “absence of direct threats” to Australia would have called into question the incessant declarations by Washington, its allies and the pliant corporate media that China is a threat to countries throughout the Asia-Pacific. When asked by the moderator for his position on the South China Sea, Di Natale confirmed that the Greens will not challenge the ideological pretext of the “pivot.” He echoed the establishment claims, referring

to “what some would say are China’s aggressive actions” and declaring that the Greens were “concerned.”

As the WSWS commented on May 18, Di Natale’s speech underscores the duplicity of the Greens. While criticising Australia’s participation in US-led wars in the Middle East, and the use of the Pine Gap military base in central Australia to coordinate the Pentagon’s criminal drone strike program, the Greens leader contributed to the conspiracy of silence on the danger of war with China.

The purpose of Di Natale’s speech was not to oppose militarism, but to give voice to the concerns of sections of business over the consequences of Australia’s alignment with the US for its trade relationships, particularly with China. Di Natale was at pains to emphasise that his views were “not radical” and to stress that they were derived from the positions of former conservative Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser.

The truth is that the Greens, no less than Labor and the Liberals, support the US confrontation with China. They have always couched their criticisms of government foreign policy, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq, from the standpoint that the Australian military should focus its operations in the “arc of stability” in the South Pacific and the Indonesian archipelago, to protect the interests of the Australian corporate and financial elite in its “backyard.” In 2010, for instance, then Greens leader, Bob Brown warned of growing Chinese influence in East Timor and cited it as a reason to bring troops back from Afghanistan. In 2011, the Greens welcomed President Obama’s announcement of the “pivot to Asia”—its massive military build-up in the Asia-Pacific—from the floor of the Australian parliament.



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