

# Australian Labor Party vows “freedom of navigation” provocations against China

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During the Australian election campaign, the Labor Party has made clear that if it forms a government after July 2 it will pursue an agenda of untrammelled militarism, in alliance with the United States, which could drag the population into a catastrophic war with China.

Over the past two weeks, Labor’s foreign affairs spokesperson Tania Plibersek and defence spokesperson Stephen Conroy have both delivered significant speeches: Plibersek to the Lowy Institute and Conroy in a debate at the National Press Club with the Defence Minister Marise Payne.

The central theme of Plibersek’s speech was to pledge unconditional support for Australia’s strategic and military alliance with the US and to commit a Labor government to continuing Australia’s military involvement in the US-led wars in Iraq and Syria.

Conroy’s speech, delivered on June 16, went far further. As he did earlier in the year, Conroy condemned the Liberal-National Coalition government for not ordering the Australian armed forces to conduct what the US and its allies call “freedom of navigation” operations within Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

The US military has, on at least four occasions since last October, sent warships or military aircraft within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limits surrounding islets and reefs claimed by China. The Chinese military responded to the last two incursions by scrambling jet fighters and dispatching naval vessels to the area.

Conroy told the National Press Club: “We believe our Defence Force should be authorised to conduct ‘freedom of navigation’ operations consistent with international law. I would give the armed forces the authority to conduct one if they believed it was necessary and safe.” As the Chinese response to US

incursions has demonstrated, there are no circumstances in which sending military forces into the waters or airspace claimed by another state is “safe.” It is an act of war.

Canberra’s sensitivity to matters of sovereignty was highlighted in 2014, when four Russian warships conducted operations in the South Pacific. Though they were indisputably in international waters, hundreds of kilometres from the Australian coast, their presence provoked a storm of media coverage and the Australian military dispatched aircraft and warships to track their movements.

Any Australian ship or aircraft that entered waters or airspace that China asserts as its sovereign territory would have to expect to be warned to immediately leave and to be possibly fired upon if they did not. The Labor Party, in other words, has vowed to order actions that could result in an armed confrontation between the Australian and Chinese armed forces and trigger an all-out war in Asia.

The increase in military operations in the South China Sea is taking place ahead of a ruling by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration on a US-backed Philippines’ legal challenge to some of China’s claims in the South China Sea. Given the pro-imperialist nature of the UN, the court is expected to rule in favour of the Philippines. The Chinese government has issued categorical statements that it does not accept that the court’s jurisdiction and will not accept its findings.

US imperialism has seized upon the long-standing and previously low-key disputes over which state has sovereignty over tiny islands and reefs to ratchet up tensions with Beijing as part of its “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia. The pivot requires the concentration of 60 percent of the US Navy and Air Force and the development of a network of bases and

access agreements across the region to encircle China. It includes detailed military planning for war on China, which involves attacking targets across the Chinese mainland while strangling its economy by imposing a naval blockade of the key sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Freedom of navigation, like the deceitful rhetoric about “terrorism,” “human rights” and “weapons of mass destruction,” is nothing more than a pretext for provocation and intervention. The claim by Washington and figures such as Conroy that China’s territorial claims threaten the ability of commercial shipping to pass through the South China Sea is absurd on its face, not least because a large proportion of the \$US5.5 trillion in annual sea-borne trade goes to or from China itself.

The real objective of US imperialism—and the Wall Street banks and corporations it serves—is economic domination over the markets and vast labour resources of China, and the elimination of the Beijing regime as a potential challenge to American global hegemony. Australian imperialism is serving as Washington’s adjunct. The buzzword in the Australian establishment is protecting the “global rules-based order”—that is, the institutions and mechanisms through which the US seeks to enforce its international dominance, on which Australia relies to pursue its interests.

The various journalists who assembled at the National Press Club to hear Conroy and Payne are generally aware of these facts. None, however, challenged Conroy over the immense geo-political implications of the Labor policy he announced.

The conscious decision by the media to prevent the danger of war from becoming the subject of public debate in the election is a continuation of the five-year conspiracy of silence on the central role of Australia—and the Labor Party in particular—in the US “pivot to Asia.”

President Barack Obama formally announced the “pivot” on the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011. The former Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard was, from the outset, the most outspoken advocate and enabler of the confrontational US turn against China. It signed agreements with Washington to allow the basing of US Marines in the northern city of Darwin and the increased use of Australian airbases by American

aircraft, particularly long-range and nuclear-capable B-52 bombers. Under Labor, the Australian military increased its efforts to become fully “inter-operable” with US forces, to the point today where dozens of Australian military personnel work in various capacities as part of the US Pacific Command.

The Coalition, which took government in September 2013, has, by-and-large, simply continued the undertaking to Washington given by Labor. Conroy’s criticisms of the Coalition for not carrying out “freedom of navigation” operations, however, underscore the fact that of the two main capitalist parties, Labor is the most militarist, bellicose and committed to the US alliance, whatever the consequences.

Given the state of tensions between the US and China, Labor’s vow to conduct “freedom of navigation” operations takes on a highly sinister character. It cannot be ruled out that the aim of such an action would be to try to provoke the Chinese military into firing on an Australian ship or aircraft. Such an incident could be used by US propagandists to portray China as the aggressor, justify military retaliation as coming to the aid of a longstanding ally and provide Washington with the pretext it needs to launch a catastrophic war.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party in the Australian election seeking to alert the working class to the threat of war, and fighting for Australian workers to join with workers around the world in building an international anti-war movement based on socialist internationalism. This perspective takes on added urgency in the face of the steadily growing dangers.

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