

Anti-China witch-hunt targets former Australian foreign minister

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28 September 2016

A prominent front-page article in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* last Friday targeted former foreign minister Bob Carr as part of an ongoing media witch-hunt against so-called Chinese agents of influence. Carr was already under fire for his current role as director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology (UTS) in Sydney, which has been branded a "propaganda vehicle" for Beijing.

The *Australian* article strongly implies that Carr, during his time as foreign minister, was "Beijing's friend" and compromised Australian and US national interests through his relations with Chinese businessmen in Australia and with Beijing. So concerned was the Obama administration when Carr was installed in March 2012 that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dispatched senior US official Kurt Campbell "to take the fledgling foreign minister aside and caution him about his pro-China position and his criticism of Barack Obama's 2011 pivot-to-Asia speech to the Australian parliament."

Carr, a prominent Labor Party figure and former premier in the state of New South Wales (NSW), has longstanding ties in Washington and has strongly supported the Australian military alliance with the United States. However, like other sections of the Australian political establishment, Carr has expressed concerns that Obama's confrontational "pivot to Asia" would undermine economic ties with China, Australia's largest trading partner. Following Obama's 2011 visit, Carr wrote in his blog: "It is patently in this country's national interest to see in the Pacific a peaceful accommodation between the US and China ... A treaty partner [to the US] we are, unapologetically, not an aircraft carrier."

The direct intervention of US Assistant Secretary of State Campbell into Australian political affairs

underlines the importance of Canberra as an American ally as the US ramps up efforts to undermine and prepare for war against China. Carr's "crime" of suggesting that Australia should work for "a peaceful accommodation between the US and China" was also Washington's chief concern in relation to former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. He was ousted in June 2010 in an inner party coup by a handful of Labor and union powerbrokers, who were later revealed as "protected sources" of the US embassy in Canberra.

Six years on, the Australian military is deeply integrated into the Pentagon's build-up throughout the region against China. The agreement signed in 2011 by Rudd's successor Julia Gillard and Obama to station US Marines in the northern city of Darwin is due to reach its full complement of 2,500 next year. The presence of US naval vessels and warplanes in Australian bases has dramatically escalated as Washington has deliberately heightened tensions with China throughout Asia, especially in the South China Sea.

The media campaign underway, not only against Carr, but anyone regarded as in any way critical of the US war drive, is a sign of just how advanced military preparations are. In recent weeks, an atmosphere akin to wartime hysteria has been whipped up, starting with the castigation of Labor Senator Sam Dastyari for accepting funds from a Chinese businessman. Chinese corporate figures, associations and students have all been accused of being purveyors of Chinese influence and propaganda.

In its criticisms of Carr, the *Australian* article makes clear that being "pro-China" is synonymous with any attempt to balance between Beijing and Washington or play down strident US condemnations of Chinese "expansionism." The article relies heavily on the

comments of Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) executive director Peter Jennings. He criticises Carr, as foreign minister, for having “walked away” from stronger US-Australian military ties, for making “sure that the American position was not promoted” and for supporting a Defence White Paper in 2013 that “appeased” China.

What Carr “walked away” from was an earlier White Paper that explicitly named China as a threat. In his memoirs, he declared that the 2013 document “contains none of the HG Wells science fiction about blockading Chinese ports and shooting off missiles and churning up the seas with state-of-the-art submarines.” In other words, Carr did not agree with a document that openly prepared for war with China, which, by implication, Jennings, the *Australian* and the Obama administration regard as necessary.

Jennings told the *Australian* that a measure of the 2013 White Paper’s “lack of realism is where we are now, where we have a more aggressive China operating in the South China Sea.” The reality is that over the past five years, the US has systemically stoked up tensions in the South China Sea by encouraging countries like the Philippines to more belligerently pursue their territorial claims against China. Beijing’s reaction—to tighten its grip on islets under its control—is branded as “aggressive” and “expansionist.”

The most sinister insinuation against Carr is that he betrayed state secrets to China. The *Australian* article said it was “unusual” that Carr went from being foreign minister, “where he oversaw ASIS, Australia’s secret intelligence service, to a Beijing-friendly think tank”—namely the Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI). Jennings said he was not suggesting that Carr did “anything improper” but then implied precisely that. “I think we should just remember that he was in a position of great responsibility with completely open access to Australian intelligence,” he declared.

Carr was provided space in Saturday’s *Australian* to respond to the accusations, in a comment entitled, “I stood for US alliance as well as our China partnership.” Significantly, he began by noting his service to the United States in the Middle East. As foreign minister, he attended the G-20 in September 2013 and “had the honour of getting up and telling the US president he had Australia’s support” for an impending air war on Syria. In fact, over the previous year, Carr played a

significant role in Washington’s vilification of the Syrian regime, even suggesting in October 2012 that President Bashir al-Assad should be assassinated.

Overall, Carr’s response is defensive. He notes that his connections to Chinese businessmen were unremarkable, pointing out their ties to Liberal Party leaders such as former Prime Minister John Howard. Carr explains that he defended the US Marine deployment to Darwin and that the policies he pursued as foreign minister were part of the consensus at the time.

Elsewhere, Carr has defended his role as director of ACRI, arguing that Australia needs a think tank focussed on China and noting that he has also been on the board of the US Studies Centre at Sydney University. He pointed out that ASPI, the think tank headed by Jennings, “receives whopping funding from US defence industries.”

The political climate, however, is shifting rapidly. The attack on Carr, an establishment figure with strong ties in Washington, is a clear sign that nothing less than full support for the US drive to war against China will be tolerated. Those who seek, as in the past, to balance between Washington and Beijing, let alone criticise the US military build-up or warn about the dangers of war, will be vilified as a Chinese fifth column.

Responding to the media witch-hunt, the University of Technology administration has already stepped in to restructure the management of the ACRI think tank. Chinese businessman Huang Xiangmo, who funded the body, stepped down as chairman of the ACRI board, which has been dissolved. As the US pursues its aggressive confrontation with China, the conditions are being created in Australia for the detention of Chinese people as enemy aliens, as were people of German, Italian and Japanese descent during the First and Second World Wars, and for repressive measures against any anti-war opposition.



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