

Trump browbeats Australian “ally”

Mike Head
4 February 2017

US President Donald Trump’s menacing phone call to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull this week, which was leaked to the media, has further exposed the thuggish character of the new administration and the brutish face of US imperialism.

During the call, scheduled to last an hour, Trump berated Turnbull over a refugee swap deal that had been brokered with the Obama administration, and then abruptly ended the conversation after 25 minutes.

This was intended to send an unmistakable message that “making America great again” means the US will lay down the law to its allies and enemies alike.

Before hanging up, Trump told Turnbull, who heads the government of one of Washington’s closest military partners, that the phone conversation was the “worst by far” of the five he had held that day with world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Just two weeks in office, Trump’s aggressive “America First” economic nationalism and militarism are sending political shockwaves around the world. Not only has the new president launched provocations and threats against Europe, Mexico, Iran and China, he has deliberately placed a question mark over a number of Washington’s key partnerships—with NATO and the European Union, and with Japan, South Korea and now Australia in the Asia-Pacific region.

Trump has declared that the US military and strategic “pivot” to Asia to confront China, initiated by his predecessor, Barack Obama, along with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has failed to halt China’s rise.

Because of its strategic location, Australia has become a key component of the “pivot” and a platform for Washington’s war plans against China. It hosts several critical bases such as the satellite intelligence facility at Pine Gap in central Australia and the northern port of Darwin, where a growing number of US marines rotate each year.

Trump and his newly-confirmed secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, have already threatened to block China’s access to the islets it controls in the South China Sea, which would constitute an act of war. Such a conflict, which would spell disaster for Australian corporate and financial interests, could rapidly escalate into a nuclear war.

Over the past quarter-century, US administrations have launched an unending series of wars in an attempt to counter by military means the economic decline of the United States. The Trump government represents a qualitative new stage in that process. His phone call with Turnbull was aimed at cracking the whip on Canberra—making clear that a Trump administration will brook no deviation as it prepares for war against its priority targets, first and foremost China.

In mid-2010, after Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd suggested that Washington make some accommodation to China’s economic growth and rising influence, he was removed via a backroom Labor Party coup orchestrated by elements close to the US embassy, including current Labor leader Bill Shorten. Last November, Obama deliberately leaked the fact that he had personally rebuked Turnbull for failing to consult Washington before a Chinese corporation was awarded a 99-year lease to operate Darwin’s strategically vital commercial port in Australia’s north.

Trump and his advisors will be aware that Turnbull has expressed reservations in the past about the “pivot” because of its implications for Australia’s relations with its major trading partner, China. Until now, while the US has sent warships and planes into the territorial zones around China’s South China Sea islets, under the bogus pretext of defending “freedom of navigation,” the Turnbull government, while carefully adhering to the main lines of the “pivot,” has refrained from following suit.

Since 2010, every Australian government has been

aware that it could be rapidly destabilised and removed by Washington. Trump's public animosity towards Turnbull has sent alarm bells ringing throughout the media and political establishment in Australia and elsewhere around the world.

Saturday's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* began: "Donald Trump is the ugly face of the world's retreat from globalism and its replacement with a new narrow nationalism. Two weeks into the job, the new US president has wasted no time going to war with the system of multilateral trade arrangements and military alliances which have underpinned Australia's prosperity in peace and security since World War II."

In the US itself, elements within the political and military establishment such as former Republican Party presidential candidate Senator John McCain have criticised Trump's hostility to Turnbull and rushed to assure the Australian government that it remains an essential part of the US military and strategic network. Even some of Trump's cabinet members have felt obliged to engage in damage control.

Defence Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis, a former general, said he would ensure that Australia continued to "have a voice in Washington." In response, Trump issued a tweet yesterday denying his mistreatment of Turnbull and thanking him for "telling the truth about our very civil conversation that FAKE NEWS media lied about."

Such manoeuvres have become part of the Trump administration's gangster-style modus operandi. But whatever the divisions in ruling circles, the underlying course is becoming increasingly clear: Washington is on a path to war.

In Australia, as in Europe, prominent media commentators, along with the Greens and various pseudo-left groups, are seeking to channel widespread popular hostility to Trump's policies in a nationalist "Australia First" direction. Fairfax Media political editor Peter Hartcher, up until now an arch advocate of confronting China, yesterday called for a more "independent" foreign policy, declaring it was time to "wake up, Australia!"

Such calls, which are invariably bound up with proposals for increased military spending, serve only to subordinate Australian workers and youth to the profit interests and war preparations of the national ruling

elite and pit them against their working-class counterparts internationally.

Workers in every country, including Australia, the US and China, face the necessity of unifying their struggles internationally to end the source of war—the capitalist profit system. Workers everywhere face the same threat of military conflict, accompanied by relentless assaults on their jobs, social conditions and democratic rights, which can be answered only through the development of a global anti-war movement based on an internationalist, anti-capitalist and socialist program.



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