

Australian establishment backs US strike on Syria

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The Liberal-National conservative government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has given Australia's full support to the Trump administration for its unilateral and illegal military strikes on the Syrian government. Even before the government took a formal position, just hours after the attacks, the Labor Party's opposition leader Bill Shorten had already declared that Labor totally endorsed US actions.

The US strike, last Friday Australian time, was the first direct attack on the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad by the US military. It was justified by unsubstantiated and highly dubious allegations that the Syrian air force had bombed civilians with chemical weapons two days before.

The political and media establishment has shown no interest in establishing the truth about the allegations. The American military and intelligence agencies—the authors of the claims in 2003 that Iraq had “weapons of mass destruction”—have proclaimed Assad guilty, so that is enough for the Turnbull government and the Labor Party. They have dismissed out of hand the categorical denials by Syrian authorities and the demands by Russia for a credible international investigation. The possibility that the strikes could result in a direct military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia has been generally downplayed.

The right-wing, anti-immigrant One Nation, whose leader Pauline Hanson previously voiced admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin, also declared support for the US attack.

The line-up behind Washington by the government and Labor has been replicated throughout the media, both commercial and state-owned. From the time the reports came through of an alleged chemical attack, Syrian government responsibility was taken for granted. After the US fired 59 cruise missiles at a

Syrian airfield, the “right” of Washington to launch yet another war was not questioned.

Greens' acting leader Scott Ludlam issued a statement of opposition to the US strike, reflecting the views of a layer of the corporate and political elite who want to distance Australia from Washington. He declared that Turnbull “must rule out any Australian involvement in this military campaign” and that “we must take a look at our closest ally and acknowledge that the alliance is now a real danger to Australia.” It is not clear if Ludlam's statement represents the views of Greens' leader Richard Di Natale and his faction of the party.

Ludlam's nationalist and limited criticisms have been effectively censored by the media, as has any serious exposures and condemnations of the lies surrounding the US strikes. Most attention has focused on whether Australian forces already operating in Syria and Iraq, as part of the so-called “Coalition” against Islamic State (ISIS), will now join US combat operations against the Assad government.

The Australian military currently has eight FA-18 fighter-bombers, surveillance aircraft, refueling aircraft, support personnel and a contingent of army trainers working with Iraqi government forces. The FA-18s regular carry out attacks on alleged ISIS targets in eastern Syria.

Defence Minister Marise Payne stated that the Pentagon has not asked Australia to carry out attacks in Syrian government-held areas or for additional Australian aircraft or personnel to be sent to the Middle East. She announced, however, that she will be holding further talks with US officials this week. On Saturday, in comments to the press, Prime Minister Turnbull for the first time tentatively endorsed the position that Assad “has to go”—that is, regime-change.

The Australian political establishment has watched cautiously as a bitter civil war has played out in Washington, with Trump being accused by the Democratic Party and much of the media of being a virtual Russian stooge. At stake has been the immediate focus of US foreign policy. Trump and the layers behind him were determined to step up an economic and political confrontation with China. The rival wing of the American elite want Russia brought to heel and the Middle East brought under US control—which means pursuing the long-held plan for regime-change to remove the Assad government in Syria and install a US puppet.

A protracted media campaign surrounding investigations about Russian influence in the US has now intersected with the alleged chemical attack in Syria. Trump had been compelled to abandon his positions that Russia could be worked with and that his only concern in the Middle East was defeating ISIS. His administration is now indicating it will seek regime-change, which means a vast escalation of violence and the extreme risk of war with Russia and Iran.

For the Australian ruling class, greater carnage in the Middle East or even war with Russia is preferable to the US attacking North Korea or taking other actions that could trigger a war with China—Australia’s largest trading partner and export market.

Under successive Labor and conservative governments, Australian imperialism fully backed the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and military build-up in the region, including US new bases in Australia. The objective, however, was to pressure China to accept ongoing American dominance of the Indo-Pacific and to restructure its economy so it could join the economic arm of the pivot—the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Trump came into power with a different agenda. He repudiated the TPP on his first day as president and has set out to force trade concessions from China by threatening to militarily challenge its key strategic interests on issues such as Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea.

At the beginning of last week, there is little doubt that countries across Asia were preparing, politically and militarily, for the possibility that the US would launch pre-emptive attacks to destroy North Korea’s nuclear weapons’ program and assassinate its leadership. With

the Syrian strike, much of the Australian ruling class may have breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that the immediate focus of the White House was instead going to be the Middle East and Russia.

Any respite, however, would have been short-lived. The Pentagon announced over the weekend that an aircraft carrier battlegroup has been ordered to return to waters off the coast of the Korean Peninsula. Even as war tensions rise in the Middle East and Europe, they are not lessening in Asia.



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