

Ex-CIA chief calls for “firm” Australian action against China

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Former top US general and Central Intelligence Agency director David Petraeus was the keynote speaker at a “gala dinner” to open the federal council meeting of the ruling Liberal Party in Sydney on Friday night.

Petraeus, who commanded the US operations during bloody “surges” in Iraq and Afghanistan, insisted that Australia must launch “freedom of navigation” exercises to challenge Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, and continue to align itself totally with the escalating military activities of US imperialism despite the uncertainties produced by the election of US President Donald Trump.

It was the latest extraordinary intervention into Australian politics in recent weeks by a parade of visiting senior figures within Washington’s military-intelligence complex, including Senator John McCain, the chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, and ex-National Intelligence Director James Clapper.

General Petraeus waived his usual six-figure fee to speak at the Liberal Party event, which allowed the cash-strapped party to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars from the 500 corporate guests, who reportedly paid \$280 a ticket or \$10,000 per table to attend.

Yet there was no criticism in the media of what amounted to a sizeable political donation, in contrast to the witch-hunt being conducted against alleged Chinese-backed donations to political parties.

In fact, the anti-China campaign has been launched, not coincidentally, amid the flurry of high-profile US visits, designed to create the political climate for military confrontations with China.

Like McCain and Clapper, Petraeus spoke as a representative of the US “deep state,” warning against any deviation from the US alliance and assuring the Australian ruling class that the Pentagon would determine American military policy, not Trump.

Although Petraeus quit as CIA chief in 2012 as the

result of a scandal about an affair with his biographer, he remains an influential figure in the military, financial and academic establishment. Before his downfall, he rose spectacularly through the military, culminating in the command of multinational forces in Iraq during 2007–08, then command of CENTCOM and of occupation forces in Afghanistan. Obama appointed him CIA director in 2011, establishing a precedent for installing a military general in the post.

Petraeus’s remarks took the form of a 45-minute question-and-answer session conducted by Brendan Nicholson from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-funded think tank.

Asked if Australia and other American allies could rely on the US under Trump’s presidency, Petraeus pointedly drew attention to the increasingly provocative US military buildup in Eastern Europe against Russia, plus Trump’s blanket approval for whatever actions the Pentagon and battlefield commanders determine.

Petraeus declared: “If you follow the money and follow the troops—don’t follow the tweets, follow what’s going on the ground—you’ll see NATO forces are moving into the Baltic States and eastern Poland.”

US foreign policy showed “more continuity than change,” but with a definite “improvement”: “You see a commander in chief devolving authority down to the Pentagon or the battlefield commanders for decisions that I think should appropriately be made at those levels.”

Petraeus gave an insight into the mentality prevailing in US ruling circles in preparing for wars to defeat any challenges to the global hegemony established by Washington after the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II.

Speaking in the context of US-China relations, Petraeus hailed a “wonderful new book” by Harvard University professor Graham Allison titled *Destined for War*. There was no question mark in the title, he noted. According to

the general, the book establishes, after reviewing instances going back centuries, that wars erupted “75 percent of the time” when “a rising power” threatened the interests of the “established power.”

Petraeus spoke of trying to manage relations with China to ensure that a war did not break out. But clearly the calculation has been made that another global conflagration may be necessary, and that war planning must proceed on that basis.

Turning to Australia’s role in this scenario, Petraeus was blunt. Nicholson asked him how important it was for Australia to send warship and planes to challenge China’s control of strategic islets in the South China Sea.

Petraeus replied: “Hugely important and I think we have to be firm. You know, let’s get the big idea right—better be firm.”

Nicholson then asked specifically if “countries like Australia should carry out freedom of navigation operations within the 12-mile perceived boundaries round those artificial islands?”

The reply was unequivocal. “Absolutely that should be the case... and I think if it can be done as a coalition, it says much more.”

This was a message not just to the Australian ruling establishment but to other governments in the Asia-Pacific that have become reliant on China economically.

Aware of China’s economic weight, as well as popular opposition to going to war, Petraeus acknowledged that “these are tough calls for national leaders.”

The general spoke of Australia’s “curious duality,” where its “number one trading partner” was also, “arguably, the number one security cause for concern.”

While nominally hoping to avoid war, Petraeus denounced China in inflammatory terms. He described China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea as an “outrageous assertion.” He accused China of “building islands” in the sea, not “reclaiming” them.

Until now, the Australian government has refrained from entering the 12-mile zones around China’s islets. However, Petraeus expressed confidence in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, describing him as a “wartime prime minister,” like former Prime Minister John Howard, whose government was among the first in the world to send troops to join the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

Petraeus also paid tribute to former Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, saying her leadership had been “also very, very important” in backing the extension of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

While not mentioned at the dinner, Gillard provided the platform for President Barack Obama to announce, in 2011, the US “pivot” to Asia to counter China. Her role, after ousting Kevin Rudd as prime minister, cemented the bipartisan Labor and Liberal-National Coalition commitment to playing a frontline role in US war preparations.

Interviewed by Fairfax Media, Petraeus also called for Australia to “take the lead” in the Philippines, where the Turnbull government has just sent two air force surveillance planes to join operations by US Special Forces and the Philippine military against alleged “ISIS-linked” fighters on the southern island of Mindanao.

Under the fraudulent banner of the “war on terrorism,” the deployment opens up a new front in Australia’s involvement in US-led wars, notably in a country where the president, Rodrigo Duterte, had shifted foreign policy toward China, seeking economic benefits.

At the Liberal Party dinner, Turnbull listened intently, along with senior cabinet ministers, including Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Treasurer Scott Morrison and Defence Minister Marise Payne. The next morning, in a speech officially opening the council meeting, Turnbull said the Australia-US alliance was “stronger than ever.”

Nevertheless, the government remains under pressure to “take the lead” in the South China Sea, as well as the Philippines. The next visiting US speaker will be Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the US Pacific Command, who has long advocated provocative operations against China in the South China Sea. At the invitation of ASPI, he will speak in Brisbane this Wednesday on “Challenges, Opportunities, and Innovation in the Indo-Pacific.”



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