

After meeting with Obama, Australian PM declares “enthusiasm” for Washington’s anti-China cordon

By Patrick O’Connor
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Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard used her meeting with President Barack Obama in Washington on Monday to emphasise her strong support for a larger US military presence in Australia, primarily directed against China.

After her forty minute discussion with Obama in the White House, Gillard responded to a journalist’s question about the possibility of new US military bases or other permanent installations in Australia: “It’s a question of discussion between great mates with two militaries that cooperate every day... We are enthusiastic and I believe the United States is enthusiastic about looking at ways we can further that cooperation into the future.” Asked if there was any pressure being exerted by US officials, she adamantly declared: “I’m using the language of ‘enthusiastic’ deliberately. There is no sense of pressure here. There is a sense of enthusiasm about how we could work together, more ways that we could work together.”

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: “One option being canvassed is rather than basing troops in Australia permanently, US forces may have access to key infrastructure such as ports, airfields and training facilities. It is understood the US Navy is also seeking more access to the naval base in Perth [the West Australian capital facing the Indian Ocean].”

The agenda behind this pending military build up was clearly spelled out during a joint press conference held between Gillard and Republican Senator John McCain yesterday. “I think Australia and the US need to co-operate on all strategic challenges and what is happening in our region is largely being defined by the rise of China,” the prime minister declared.

McCain added that the Chinese “are a rising power

and they are a military power”, which had acted “very assertively in the region”. He continued: “Now, that doesn’t mean to me that there’s going to be conflict—that’s not necessarily so. [But] I do think that the United States and Australia will be working more actively to ensure that there is not any tensions in the region.” Gillard made no attempt to distance herself from these blunt remarks.

Australia constitutes the southern flank of US imperialism’s anti-China cordon, which includes regional allies Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia. McCain’s statements underscore the extraordinarily provocative character of Washington’s moves to confront Beijing’s increasing military, economic, and diplomatic influence in East Asia as US imperialism attempts to utilise its military predominance against rival powers to offset its deepening economic weakness. At the same time, Beijing’s expanding naval forces—used to secure vital supply routes for the raw materials it needs for its ongoing industrial expansion—represent the first significant challenge to US hegemony in the Pacific Ocean since 1945. The situation threatens a nuclear war between the two powers.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* today reported on Gillard’s week-long US trip: “Washington officials familiar with the talks say Australia was a ‘strategic backwater’ during the Cold War but with the rise of China its status was critical to the US.” The reference to Australia as a former “strategic backwater” is overstated—intelligence bases in the country played a key role for the US in the Cold War. In fact, fears that the installations were in danger of being shut down was an important factor in the CIA destabilisation drive

against the 1972-75 Whitlam Labor government. That unnamed US officials are now stressing Australia's "critical" role against China points to the intensifying great power rivalries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Gillard's response has been to recklessly commit Australia to any US war against China. Moreover, she has done so without any public discussion on the issue. At no time during the federal election campaign, just last August, was Australia's policy towards China even mentioned.

The prime minister's visit to Washington and New York this week once again underscores the political calculations behind the coup against Kevin Rudd last June. As prime minister, Rudd had antagonised the Obama administration for launching various diplomatic initiatives, without first clearing them with US officials, aimed at mediating and counterbalancing American and Chinese interests in East Asia. He had also been reluctant to accede to US demands for more Australian troops in Afghanistan. For these reasons, Washington, and its embassy in Canberra, came to regard Rudd as an unreliable ally. Gillard was installed courtesy of a handful of Labor and trade union factional leaders, many of whom, it is now known through leaked US embassy cables, had secretly collaborated with Washington officials.

Obama was fulsome in his praise of Gillard on Monday. Declaring the US had "no stronger ally than Australia", he added that when he first met the prime minister last year he "was immediately charmed, as I'm sure at least a good chunk of the Australian people are".

Unfortunately for Gillard, the president's remarks happened to coincide with the publication of an opinion poll, published in the *Australian*, showing that Labor is down to just 30 percent support—the lowest level ever recorded in the history of the Newspoll survey, which began in 1985. Gillard's personal approval rating is now just three percentage points higher than Rudd's was when he was ousted—belying the official reason given for the coup—that it was driven by Labor's declining poll numbers. According to the latest survey, more people would prefer Rudd to be Labor leader (44 percent) than Gillard (37 percent).

Gillard has been at pains throughout her trip to emphasise her agreement with every aspect of US foreign policy. After speaking with Obama, the prime

minister affirmed her open-ended commitment to the Afghanistan war. "It is hard, but it's something that I am very personally committed to, to seeing the mission done and to ensuring we play our part," she declared.

Asked about Obama's failure to close Guantánamo Bay, where two Australian citizens were among those detained without trial and brutalised, she insisted that "this is an issue for the American administration to determine".

Gillard and Obama discussed US-European preparations for a potential military intervention into Libya, which would be aimed at installing a pliant government in line with the interests of the major oil companies and the foreign policy imperatives of US imperialism across North Africa and the Middle East. The Australian leader offered her full support for Washington's manoeuvres, and rejected suggestions that foreign minister Kevin Rudd, who has repeatedly demanded the imposition of a no-fly zone, was more "hawkish" on Libya than she was.

Asked if she was "on the same page" as Rudd, Gillard replied: "We're all on the same page about our revulsion for the regime of Colonel Gaddafi and its violent current actions, and all on the same page about exploring options for dealing with this violence, including a no-fly zone."

The Australian prime minister is scheduled to address a joint sitting of the Congress later today.

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