

Obama thanks Australian prime minister for war efforts

By Peter Symonds
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In his first trip to Washington as Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull reaffirmed his government's commitment to the US-led war in Iraq and Syria and to the Obama administration's military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region against China. While Turnbull's tone was not as strident as his predecessor Tony Abbott's, the underlying message was the same: full support for Washington's wars of aggression around the world.

In a media briefing yesterday before their meeting, President Barack Obama expressed his "extraordinary gratitude" to Australia and pointed out that Turnbull had visited Australian troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq before arriving in Washington. "Those are just two places where we see the value of Australia's armed forces and the remarkable contribution they have made," Obama said.

On the eve of Turnbull's departure for Washington, the Australian government announced it would not be increasing the size of its military force in Iraq. This provoked thinly disguised criticism by former defence minister Kevin Andrews, who has advocated dispatching special forces to fight Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) elements.

Obama, however, gave no hint of pressuring Turnbull for a greater contribution, noting that Australia was providing the second largest contingent of ground forces after the US. The Liberal-National Coalition government, with the backing of the Labor Party opposition, has committed 780 military personnel to Iraq, including 380 army trainers and 400 air force staff, supporting strikes by Australian war planes in Iraq and Syria.

Turnbull took the opportunity to hail last month's success of the bloody battle for Ramadi, which reduced much of the city to rubble. He insisted it was an

"absolute adrenaline shot" for the Iraqi government, delivered by troops trained by Australia and the US. Speaking the previous day at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Turnbull cited Ramadi as a good example of putting "the right boots on the right ground."

While not directly referring to China, Obama underlined the importance of Australian support for the US "pivot to Asia" against Beijing. "Our marines in Australia, the joint exercises that we do, the work to confirm the international order and the rules of the road in respect to issues like maritime law—are all critical for the continued expansion of commerce and the sustained peaceful conditions that are allowing our economies to thrive," he said.

Over the past year, the Obama administration has ramped up tensions in the South China Sea, repeatedly demanding China end its land reclamation activities and halt "militarisation" of islets under its control. In reality, the US has militarised the maritime disputes in the region by sending warships and warplanes to challenge Chinese claims and consolidating military ties with countries throughout the region.

Obama invited Turnbull to Washington when the two met at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Manila during November. In remarks leaked to the media, the US president rapped Turnbull over the knuckles over the decision to lease Darwin's commercial port to a Chinese company. Even though the deal had been cleared by the Australian military and intelligence establishment, Obama declared Washington should have been given "a heads up over that sort of thing." Darwin is where the US Marine force, which is due to number 2,500 by 2017, "rotates," or is effectively based.

The incident is an indication of just how little room

for manoeuvre the US gives its Australian ally. In mid-2010, Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in a backroom party coup by a handful of factional powerbrokers with close ties to Washington. Rudd was removed from office not because of any opposition to the US alliance, but because he was calling on the Obama administration to make concessions to China, right at the point when Washington was preparing its confrontational “pivot to Asia.”

Turnbull has previously evinced a similar stance to Rudd, reflecting the dilemma facing Australian capitalism, which is heavily dependent on China as its largest trading partner, but relies strategically on US imperialism. In Washington, however, the Australian prime minister lined up with the Obama administration on every issue.

In his speech to the CSIS, Turnbull made a point of emphasising Australia’s involvement in every war alongside the United States and the enduring character of the US military alliance. While emphasising the importance of China-US cooperation for the peace and stability of the region, he nevertheless made clear that Beijing had to make concessions to Washington’s demands.

Turnbull noted that Chinese President Xi Jinping had often said China needed to avoid the Thucydides Trap—a reference to the way in which a rising Athens had come into conflict with the dominant power, Sparta, in ancient Greece. He hoped “China’s actions would be carefully calculated to make conflict less likely, not more, and would seek to reassure neighbours and build their confidence in China’s intentions.”

After declaring that China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea were “a secondary consideration” to ensuring regional stability, Turnbull urged all parties “to refrain from further construction on those islands or reefs and to refrain from militarisation”—a standard line from Washington, directed above all against Beijing.

In calling on China to abide by international law, the prime minister suggested that the US should ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea—not as a matter of principle but rather to strengthen the US diplomatic offensive by ending its obvious double standard on the issue.

During his visit, Turnbull also provided support for Obama on two key issues—the Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP) and the international nuclear deal with Iran—both of which have been heavily criticised in the US Congress. In his press briefing with Obama, he was effusive in praising the nuclear agreement, saying: “That was a formidable effort, a great example of leadership on the part of the United States.”

The TPP functions as the economic arm of the “pivot” to ensure, as Obama has insisted, that the US, not China, “writes the rules” of the 21st century global economy. Turnbull used a speech to the US Chamber of Commerce to make an unabashed call for continued American dominance in Asia. The stability and prosperity of the Asia Pacific, he declared, “could not have occurred without the strong position, the strong presence of the United States ... Pax Americana has underwritten that growth and everybody benefited, every country in the region ... But that needs to continue to be worked on, and the TPP is a critically important part of that.”

US imperialism, however—no longer in a position to dictate the global economic rules by way of its economic predominance—is engaged in a military build-up throughout the region in preparation for conflict with China. Turnbull has again confirmed that Australian imperialism will back its US ally in this war drive.

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