

US reignites controversy over Chinese lease of Australian port

By Peter Symonds
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A US State Department opinion poll leaked this week to the *Australian* newspaper has reignited the controversy over last year's leasing of the commercial port of Darwin to the Chinese company Landbridge. The agreement provoked barely concealed hostility from Washington. President Obama reportedly told Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to "let us know next time" during their first one-on-one meeting in Manila last November.

Darwin is the focus of a major US military build-up in northern Australia as part of the broader "pivot to Asia" aimed at preparing for war with China. Next year the number of US Marines "rotating" through the northern city is due to reach 2,500—the maximum agreed in 2011 by the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. This week, General Lori Robinson, commander of the US Pacific Air Forces, confirmed that high-level talks were taking place to station long-range American bombers, potentially including supersonic B-1s, in air bases near Darwin.

In this context, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence Research last month commissioned two polls in Australia of 1,000 respondents. It reportedly found that 89 percent saw the Landbridge deal as posing "some risk" or "lot of risk" to national security. The results of opinion polls are notoriously dependent on the question asked, particularly when, as in the case of the Darwin lease, the subject is not widely known.

The accompanying analysis by the Bureau of Intelligence Research makes its attitude abundantly clear. It highlighted Landbridge's "reported ties" to the Chinese military as raising "concerns port access could facilitate intelligence collection on US and Australian military forces stationed nearby."

When the controversy erupted last November, fuelled in large part by Murdoch's *Australian*, Defence

Department secretary Dennis Richardson defended the decision to give the green light for the 99-year Landbridge lease. After noting that the Darwin commercial port and the navy base were separated by seven kilometres, he said: "The notion that the Chinese can establish a spy base there simply does not stand up to hard-headed scrutiny."

Despite bland denials by the US State Department, the decision to leak the poll results is clearly aimed at fuelling opposition to the lease and putting further pressure on the government. Turnbull is already under fire from the Labor opposition for failing to follow the US in directly challenging China in the South China Sea through military "freedom of navigation" operations.

Writing in today's *Australian*, Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), declared: "Australia's handling of the intertwined issues of the Port of Darwin Lease, the US 'enhanced defence co-operation' and the South China Sea freedom of navigation operations are perplexing US observers of the alliance relationship."

Jennings, who has stridently opposed the Landbridge lease, drew a parallel with the decision by the New Zealand Labour government in the 1980s to ban nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered US warships from visiting the country's ports. What followed, he declared, was "25 years of New Zealand military isolation from the US," implying that US-Australian strategic ties could be at risk.

"There is a lesson here for Canberra in managing our bilateral alliance with the US over the Port of Darwin issue: don't take US interests for granted," Jennings wrote. "A generation ago in Wellington, [NZ prime minister] Lange found amusement in playing to his domestic audience over port access. The Americans

didn't quite get the joke.”

In again denouncing the Landbridge deal this week, the *Australian*'s foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who has intimate ties to the US defence and intelligence establishment, was long on super-inflated hyperbole. “It is a stellar example of shambolic Australian policy, poorly executed, woefully uncoordinated, with feeble post facto justifications and a wholly disgraceful lack of notification of our key ally, the US.”

Sheridan emphatically dismissed any suggestion that the US State Department was meddling in Australian politics, declaring that the polling was “100 percent harmless.” Senior members of the Turnbull government, however, reportedly expressed anger, saying Washington usually conducted such opinion polls in third world countries like Afghanistan. “It’s outrageous. Who do they think they are?” one told the *Australian*.

ASPI’s Jennings noted that Australia was not about to be relegated to the status of New Zealand. What he did not point out is that Washington regards its bases such as Pine Gap in Australia and access to Australian military facilities as far too important to consider any downgrading of relations. Along with Japan, Australia is central to the US “pivot” and the Pentagon’s war planning against China.

Washington has already intervened in Australian politics. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in 2010 in an inner-party coup by a handful of Labor and union powerbrokers later identified in WikiLeaks cables as US embassy “protected sources.” Rudd earned the Obama administration’s enmity for suggesting the US make concessions to accommodate China when the White House was preparing its confrontational “pivot.” Gillard, who replaced Rudd, provided the Australian parliament as a venue for Obama to formally announce the “pivot” in November 2011 and signed the US Marine basing agreement.

If senior Turnbull ministers are likening the State Department polling in Australia to US political machinations in Afghanistan, it reflects concerns in Canberra that moves could be made against the current government. Turnbull only became prime minister last September by ousting Tony Abbott as party leader. In the run-up to the leadership challenge, Turnbull distanced himself from his previous criticisms of the “pivot” and appeals for a US-China accommodation in

Asia.

Increasingly, however, verbal support for the “pivot” is not enough for the US. ASPI executive director Jennings commented: “A further source of puzzlement [in Washington] is the gap between the strength of Australian rhetoric about the importance of freedom of navigation and air transit over the South China Sea contrasted with a decided reluctance to actually stage a naval transit.”

Sending an Australian warship into territorial waters claimed by China not only risks economic retaliation by the country’s largest trading partner, but, amid the high tensions fuelled by the US “pivot,” could lead to a military miscalculation or clash with far more serious consequences. Yet that is exactly what Washington is pressing Canberra to do. Its vehement opposition to the Darwin port lease can only be understood in this context—the lease is regarded as an inadmissible concession to the “enemy.”

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