

Following South China Sea ruling, Australian Labor Party again demands military action

By James Cogan
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A public debate has erupted in Australia about carrying out military operations against China, following the politically-motivated July 12 ruling by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of the US-backed Philippine challenge to Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The central issue that was concealed from the population by the political and media establishment during the recent Australian election—the danger of Australia becoming involved in all-out US-led war against China—is now coming into the open.

Once again, the calls for Australia to militarily confront China are being spearheaded by the Labor Party and its defence spokesperson Senator Stephen Conroy. In bellicose and deceitful comments on Wednesday, Conroy declared that Chinese “bullying” in the South China Sea had been “called out by the international court.”

In reality, the United States, through its “pivot to Asia,” has been dramatically increasing its military operations in the region and building up a network of bases and strategic partnerships directed against China. Tensions have grown in the South China Sea in direct response to US-led efforts to encircle and intimidate the Beijing regime.

Since late 2015, Washington has invoked the “right to freedom of navigation” to send warships and planes to violate the 12-nautical-mile zone around Chinese-claimed reefs and islands in both the Spratly Islands and Paracel Island chain, provoking Chinese military reactions. The Obama administration has now achieved the predictable decision from a UN court that Chinese claims are invalid and that various of its activities are “illegal.”

As he has done previously, Conroy denounced the Liberal-National Party Coalition government for only

verbally supporting US operations but not ordering the Australian military to conduct its own provocations. “It is vital that we not just talk the talk but that we act, and be seen to act,” Conroy declared. “The government is pretending that they’re engaged in freedom of navigation when in fact it has not specifically authorised our Navy and our Air Force ... Australia should authorise its forces to both sail and fly over the areas of the South China Sea.”

Conroy's criticisms and demands for Australian operations provoked a furious response from Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Bishop told journalists: “What he [Conroy] is urging would inevitably lead to an escalation of tensions were it to be followed. I think that's a highly irresponsible call at this point.”

Turnbull portrayed Conroy as advocating views that were not shared by Labor leader Bill Shorten and deputy leader and foreign affairs spokesperson Tania Plibersek. “Senator Conroy is steaming in a direction all of his own,” Turnbull stated. “Only Senator Conroy appears to be calling for an escalation of tensions.”

In fact, Conroy vowed during the defence ministers' debate during the election that if Labor won government, he would immediately order operations by the Australian military in the South China Sea. His statement was not repudiated by Shorten, Plibersek or any other Labor figure. Shorten did not oppose his latest remarks either, but instead declared Labor's support for “freedom of navigation.” Like Conroy, Shorten is known as a “US asset.” In June 2010, both played key roles in ousting Kevin Rudd as Labor prime minister, in large part because Washington viewed him as insufficiently committed to confronting China.

Conroy is articulating the position not only of the dominant factions of the Labor Party, but the Obama

administration, the US military, key Australian strategic think tanks and the Rupert Murdoch-owned media. Behind the backs of the population, discussion has raged for months in these circles over the necessity for Australia to carry out operations to demonstrate that the US is not “acting alone.”

Currently in Washington to attend the Australian American Leadership Dialogue, Conroy gave a television interview this morning Australian time. He answered Turnbull and Bishop by repeating his criticism of the Coalition government and his call for military action. In line with the position of the White House and Pentagon, he stressed he was advocating an independent deployment by Australian forces, not a joint operation with the US.

Conroy’s public attack on the Turnbull government coincides with a just-announced visit to Australia this weekend by US Vice President Joe Biden, a key architect of the “pivot” to Asia and a vocal advocate of confronting China. Biden will hold top-level talks with Turnbull and deliver a “major speech” on US-Australian strategic relations.

Alongside Japan, Australia is the key imperialist ally of the US in the Asia-Pacific. President Barack Obama announced the “pivot” on the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011. During that visit, the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard signed sweeping new agreements for the operations of US military forces from Australian territory. Australian military forces are effectively integrated with their American counterparts, having spent the past 15 years in constant wars alongside the US in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and implementing the doctrine of “interoperability.”

Australia’s central role in the US preparations for war with China has proceeded despite deep misgivings in sections of the country’s corporate elite and political establishment. Beyond the military implications, the economic consequences of even a minor clash would be devastating. China is both Australia’s largest export market and leading trading partner.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) explicitly warned the incoming government in a paper published in June: “There’s potential that these disputes [in the South and China Seas], especially between the US and China, could spiral into conflict and involve Australia. Australian vessels operating

with US forces in the region, as well as US forces stationed in Australia, would be at considerable risk of being attacked.”

The Obama administration is well aware that before the Coalition won government in 2013, both Turnbull and Bishop had criticised Labor over its full backing for the US pivot and urged caution in regard to China. Biden’s visit is in large part to ensure that now, as the actual prospect of military confrontation looms, Turnbull and Bishop do not attempt to pull Australia back from the brink.

Tom Switzer, a senior fellow at the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, bluntly observed in today’s *Australian*: “During his high-level, face-to-face discussions in Australia next week, Biden will call on Canberra to help draw lines in the sand—water!—and create as favourable a strategic environment in East Asia as is possible.”

A “favourable” strategic environment, from the standpoint of Washington, is one in which the various allies and partners of the US actively join in the stepped-up diplomatic and military provocations against China. These will have been planned long in advance of the justifications provided by the UN court ruling.

As the WSWS noted in a comment on the defence ministers’ debate during the Australian election, the purpose of an Australian operation might be to “provoke the Chinese military into firing on an Australian ship or aircraft.” The WSWS stated: “Such an incident could be used by the propagandists of US imperialism to portray China as the aggressor, justify military retaliation as coming to the aid of a longstanding ally and provide Washington with the pretext it needs to launch a catastrophic war.”

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