

Australian government flags “foreign policy reset” in response to Trump

By James Cogan
4 March 2017

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced this week that 113 Australian ambassadors, high commissioners and consul-generals from around the world will gather in Canberra for three days of intense talks later this month. It is the first time that such a number of top-ranking diplomatic officials have been summoned back to Australia. The summit, Bishop asserted, would discuss a “foreign policy reset.”

The ostensible reason for the summit is for Bishop, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and other Liberal-National government ministers to canvas the views of senior diplomats on the content of a new Foreign Policy White Paper, scheduled to be published mid-year. The last such white paper was released in February 2003, on the eve of Australia’s participation in the illegal US invasion of Iraq. The US, that document asserted, was “pre-eminent” and “no other country or group of countries” would be capable of challenging it in the “foreseeable future.” The US-Australia military alliance was declared as indispensable to Australian imperialist interests.

Fourteen years on, the world situation has radically altered. The situation is even profoundly different from June 2010, when the then governing Labor Party ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister in large part because of his hesitation to commit Australia to a confrontational US foreign policy against China—later dubbed the “pivot to Asia” by the Obama administration.

While not mentioned in official statements, there is no question what lies behind the discussion of a “reset.” The Trump administration’s “America First” agenda and the manifest conflicts it has provoked in US ruling circles have produced consternation in the Australian political and strategic establishment. Trump’s policy has placed a question mark over the calculations that led the dominant sections of the Australian ruling class to support Obama’s “pivot” and the associated Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Obama’s build-up of American military power in Asia was overwhelmingly welcomed in Australian ruling circles. It was expected that the “pivot” would pressure the Beijing

regime to retreat from its aspirations to become the regional power in Asia, which threatened Australian strategic influence, particularly in Indonesia and the South Pacific.

The exclusion of China from the TPP, and therefore denial of privileged access to US markets, was expected to compel Beijing to bow to Washington’s economic dictates and further open its own domestic markets to external competition. The “pivot,” Obama declared, would ensure that the US would “write the rules of the road for trade in the 21st century,” not China or other countries. Australian-based corporations and investors would gain in the process, initially through greater access to regional markets and ultimately in China itself.

The Australian ruling class, under successive Labor and conservative governments, facilitated Obama’s agenda by granting additional American military access to bases in the country and full-throated support for, or direct participation in, US intrigues, spying and interventions around the globe. The fact that Australian exports to China continued to grow and Beijing signed a favourable free trade agreement with Canberra in 2015 was hailed as proof that aligning with the US had no negative economic consequences.

With few exceptions, the Australian elite, including the Turnbull government and the Labor Party opposition, confidently anticipated that Hillary Clinton would be elected as US president and continue the general policies of the Obama administration. Those expectations lie in tatters.

Trump has repudiated the TPP and is instead demanding bilateral arrangements that would benefit American-based corporations but would likely be detrimental to Australian corporate interests. His administration has threatened to force China, Japan and other countries into negotiations by imposing tariffs on their goods. This could plunge world trade into turmoil and impact sharply on Australia’s massive exports of iron ore, coal, natural gas and other raw materials, above all, to China, Japan and South Korea.

Even one of the most ardent defenders of the US alliance, the *Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, bewailed Trump’s abandonment of the TPP as a blow to Australia, a

“tragedy” and a “strategic loss.” Sheridan’s no less pro-US and anti-Chinese counterpart, Fairfax Media international editor Peter Hartcher, declared Trump’s repudiation of the TPP as the “moment the US gave the world to China.” In an abrupt turn, Hartcher effectively called for a shift in Australia’s foreign policy orientation toward Beijing.

Most ominously, the Trump administration has threatened that if China does not grant its economic demands, it will repudiate Washington’s longstanding formal recognition of Beijing’s claim to sovereignty over the island of Taiwan—the “One China policy”—and intensify US challenges to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. China has responded with veiled counter-threats of war. Already, the Trump White House has threatened “direct military action” against the North Korean regime, which China has historically regarded as a buffer state between its own borders and US-aligned South Korea and which it went to war in 1950 to defend.

The Australian ruling class is left to contemplate an alliance with the US that could lead to economic ruin and, as a result of the country’s virtual integration into the US military posture in Asia over the past six years, immediate involvement in any conflict with China.

The potential fault-lines between Washington and Canberra are becoming evident. The Turnbull government this week actively participated in talks in Japan on the Chinese-initiated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which excludes the US. Yesterday, the Australian trade minister issued a carefully worded criticism of the Trump administration over its threats to undermine the World Trade Organisation. Turnbull reportedly personally intervened to ensure that China was invited to send a representative to talks in Chile later this month on whether the TPP could continue in some form without US involvement.

Turnbull and Trump have already had one heated phone conversation and are not due to even meet until at least May. The acrimony reputedly centred on Turnbull’s insistence that the US honour a sordid agreement made with Obama for the US to take refugees from Australian-run detention camps in the South Pacific. Reports suggest that the tensions may have been sparked by Turnbull’s refusal to commit to sending more Australian military forces to the Middle East or to conducting operations in the South China Sea.

In 2011 and 2012, Turnbull was one of the few establishment figures who criticised the Labor government’s embrace of the US “pivot” on the grounds it could disrupt economic relations with China. While Turnbull shelved his concerns after his Liberal Party took office, a faction of the ruling elite is now urging him to take steps to extricate Australia from Trump’s even more

bellicose anti-China agenda. This week, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating again lambasted successive Australian governments for failing to pursue a “positive strategic policy of engagement with China rather than a negative one.” Keating declared the upcoming White Paper was a “valuable opportunity” for Turnbull and Bishop to elaborate a “positive approach.”

At this point, any questioning of the US alliance is largely being kept out of view. Instead, the Panglossian conception is being advanced by various analysts, in a “debate” on the Lowy Institute think tank web site, that Australia can convince the Trump administration to back away from its unilateralism and take its allies’ interests into account.

For its part, the Turnbull government is denying the existence of any rifts and issuing repeated pro forma statements on the “enduring” nature of the alliance and the crucial US role in upholding the post-World War II “rules-based global order”—even as the Trump administration moves to dismantle the last vestiges of these longstanding relations.

The fears in the Australian elite were summed up in a comment on the Lowy Institute web site by Sam Roggeveen, a former intelligence official, now strategic analyst. US and Australian economic and strategic interests, Roggeveen wrote, have “never clashed directly” but “they are beginning to do now.” He warned: “What if the government needs to make moves which could harm us economically, or which could damage our standing with our ally, or which could lead to the commitment of military forces in North Asia? The public needs to be prepared for such potentially dramatic shifts...”

Given the history of American intrigue in Australian politics, it can be taken as given that actions are underway by US agencies to try to ensure that such concerns do not result in Canberra attempting to make any foreign policy shift away from Washington.

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