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Australian imperialism: Political attack dog for US war drive

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Nick Beams

The recent remarks by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott that he was going to “shirtfront” Russian President Vladimir Putin over the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 at the summit of G20 leaders in Brisbane next month may at first sight appear somewhat bizarre.

But far from being a strange antipodean outburst, Abbott’s remarks are an expression of intensifying geo-political tensions, especially the US push against Russia, and the increasing replacement of diplomacy with militarism and sabre-rattling.

The term “shirtfront” is derived from Australian rules football and refers to a player running headlong into an opponent, with the aim of knocking him to the ground, possibly causing injury.

While the choice of words may have been Abbott’s, and in that sense accidental, the belligerence of the remarks was not. It was an expression of the increasing global role being played by Australian imperialism as a point man for the US war drive, directed against both Russia and China. The Russian government made clear it understood that, while the voice was Abbott’s, the message came from Washington.

Australia has already been fully integrated into the US “pivot to Asia” against China. Its role was prepared by the ousting of former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in an inner-party coup in June 2010 orchestrated by factional operatives within the party with close ties to the US

embassy. The removal of Rudd, who had expressed the need to accommodate the growing economic power of China in East Asia, followed the ousting of Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama just weeks before after he had evinced a foreign policy orientation directed towards China.

Since the events of June 2010, Australian foreign policy has proceeded in lockstep with the US. The pivot to Asia, which was announced by US President Obama from the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011, has been followed by the ever-closer integration of Australia into the military and political offensive being directed against China. Last November, after China's declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone including around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, over which it has a dispute with Japan, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop issued some of the most strident denunciations of Beijing's actions.

In January, Bishop, in contradiction to the prevailing conventional political wisdom that Australia is economically dependent on China, insisted that given the closeness of financial ties and the level of American investment, the US was not only Australia's most important strategic partner, but its most important economic one as well.

This year has seen a rise in Australian political, diplomatic and military activity in line with US interests, which has assumed an increasing belligerent character.

When MH17 went down on July 17, Abbott's initial reaction was somewhat cautious, pointing out that the facts of the disaster were not yet clear. But just hours later, following a discussion with Washington but no change in the established facts, Abbott issued statements denouncing the role of Russia—a position which has been maintained by the entire political establishment over the past three months.

Almost from the outset, the question was raised as to whether Australia, the host nation of the upcoming G20 summit, should withdraw its invitation to the Russian president. That question was settled on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund meeting over the weekend of October 11–12, when the US made it clear that it was not in favour of Putin's exclusion. The motivating factor was the clear opposition of the other members of the BRICS group of countries—Brazil, India, China and South Africa—to such a move. Earlier, Russia had been cut out of meetings of the G8, but the US decided that this was not possible at the G20.

However, the US is determined that the anti-Russian rhetoric be intensified at every opportunity. Australia plays a unique role in this regard. As a middle level imperialist power, completely dependent on the US strategically and without economic or other ties to Russia, it is free to function as a kind of political attack dog for Washington as the US pursues its drive for global domination. The only possible area where there may have been a conflict was over China. But that issue was settled by the coup against Rudd four years ago.

Australian imperialism's new global role has also been exemplified in its fulsome support for renewed US military intervention in the Middle East. Australia was one of the first countries to sign on to Obama's new "coalition of the willing", committing military aircraft to bombing operations in Iraq and the use of special military forces in that country.

As part of its role on the political and military front, Australia has also been heavily involved in seeking to stifle anti-war opposition by manufacturing one terror scare after another to magnify the alleged threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The largest police operation in Australian history was conducted on September 18, supposedly to thwart an ISIS plot to carry out a public beheading. The action was eagerly seized upon by US Secretary of State John Kerry as he sought to drum up congressional and international support for US military action. The raids resulted in the arrest of just one person on highly dubious, terrorist-related charges

There is another key aspect of the increasing militarism of the Australian government that also forcefully expresses global processes—the attempt to project rising social tensions outward.

Australian capitalism was to some extent insulated from the initial impact of the financial breakdown of 2008 due to its economic connections with the expanding Chinese economy. But now the full effects of the global crisis are coming home, in some cases with added force because of the delay.

The mining boom, which has been of crucial importance in sustaining the Australian economy, is well and truly over. Mass sackings are being carried out at coal mines, while revenues from iron ore sales, which constitute one fifth of the country's exports and form a key component of government tax income, are being hit by price falls amounting to 40 percent so far this year.

Social inequality is increasing, real wages remain stagnant or are being cut, and poverty is on the increase. In common with the situation in all the major capitalist powers, the official political establishment is regarded with growing hostility by ever-wider sections of the population.

Placed within this context, Abbott's "shirtfront" confrontation with Putin is another expression of the rise of militarism internationally, which is leading to another world war unless it is stopped through the political intervention of the international working class.