

Australian Greens leader criticises the US alliance—without mentioning China

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18 May 2016

The leader of the Australian Greens, Richard Di Natale, delivered a key foreign policy speech on May 17 to the Lowy Institute, a leading strategic policy think tank, in which he made carefully worded criticisms of the US-Australia alliance. The speech pointed to the divisions in the Australian ruling establishment over the country's alignment with US militarism on a world scale, and particularly with Washington's "pivot to Asia"—the concerted US diplomatic, economic and military strategy to threaten and undermine China. The "pivot" has steadily escalated since November 2011.

Di Natale framed his speech entirely from the standpoint of the defence of Australia's "national security"—a code-word for the defence of the interests of the corporate and financial elite. He gave voice to longstanding concerns of sections of the ruling class that Canberra's integration into US military operations, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, threatens to jeopardise critical trade relationships, especially with China, and embroil it in a major military conflict.

The theme of the speech was that climate change was the primary threat to "national security"—not the US-led "war on terror" that has dominated Australian foreign policy for 15 years. Speaking for the interests that stand behind the Greens, he complained that environmental-based corporations were missing out on the "economic opportunities" that would result from a "renewable economy."

The Greens' leader publicly vented the frustration of sections of the political establishment, in both the US and Australia, that 15 years of US-led wars in the Middle East have resulted in an intractable quagmire. He declared: "Our unflinching support for the US means that Australia has been complicit in the horrific consequences borne as a result of these foreign incursions... the situation in Iraq is a horrifying, deadly testament to this."

Di Natale described the 2003 Iraq invasion as "illegal"

and a "grievous strategic disaster" that had destabilised the Middle East and contributed to the rise of Islamic State. He called for the withdrawal of Australian troops from the current US-led war in Syria and Iraq.

Of perhaps greater note, Di Natale condemned the use of Pine Gap, one of the US military's most critical communications and spy bases, located in central Australia, to carry out "drone assassinations" in the Middle-East, Pakistan and Africa.

No leader of a major parliamentary party has, to this point, spoken publicly in such language about US foreign policy and the US-Australia alliance. Di Natale also asserted that the Greens would oppose aspects of the bipartisan Labor and Coalition policy to spend vast sums on major military acquisitions. He declared his party would cancel the \$17 billion purchase of F35 strike fighters, and only support building six new submarines, not 12—which will cost at least \$50 billion. In a populist pitch, he contrasted the resources devoted to the military with the cuts to healthcare, education and other essential services. He stressed, however, that the Greens did "support the modernisation of our defence capabilities."

Di Natale proceeded to declare that Australia's "relationship with the US has become a paradox." He said that while the pretext of the alliance was to "ensure our defence," it had become "the most likely reason that Australia would confront an aggressive foe." Stressing that his statements were not "radical," he indicated that they were directly copied from *Dangerous Allies*, the 2014 book authored by the now deceased, former Liberal Party Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser.

It was Fraser who had referred to the "paradox" of the US alliance and advocated that it be revoked, Pine Gap shut down and all other relations with the US military ended. Fraser had explicitly tied his argument to the dangers of Australia being drawn into a US war with China. He called for an "independent" foreign policy on

the part of Australian imperialism, which he declared would require a massive increase in Australian military spending and that the population accept lower living standards to pay for it.

Unlike Fraser, Di Natale insisted that he was only calling for a “conversation,” aimed at “redefining” the US-Australia alliance, not abolishing it. He made no criticisms of the joint US-Australian preparations for war against China, and failed to refer to the military tensions that Washington has provoked by confronting Beijing over its territorial claims in the South China Sea.

What Di Natale did not say was as significant as what he did. Fairfax Media, directly quoting from speech notes that had been provided by Di Natale’s office, reported prior to the event that the Greens leader would declare: “Australia is rapidly escalating our military technology so as to join and contribute to a regional arms race, interceding in a South China Sea proxy war between two of our largest trading partners over 4,000 kilometres from our shores, all without diplomatic efforts having even gotten out of first gear.”

By the time Di Natale arrived at the lectern of the Lowy Institute, any reference to “arms race” and “proxy war” had apparently been deleted.

Clearly perplexed by the omission, the Lowy Institute moderator asked Di Natale to state the Greens’ position on US-China tensions in the South China Sea. In a rambling response, Di Natale, echoing the position of the Coalition government and Labor, referred to what “some would say are China’s aggressive actions” and called for “arbitration” to settle the tensions. Concluding his answer, he said: “We have major concerns about the conflict in the South China Sea.... [but] I don’t think anyone has a clear response about how Australia should respond to that threat.”

When he was challenged over the fact that China has categorically rejected “arbitration” on the territorial disputes by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration—a body stacked with figures linked to the US and its allies—Di Natale refused to put a position. He lamely stated again that “nobody has an answer.”

In fact, the US military has spelled out, in what was initially called the “AirSea Battle” plan, Washington’s “answer.” Along with Australia, and other regional allies, the US is preparing for a massive assault on mainland China to compel Beijing to submit to its dictates. Last week, the US Navy carried out its third provocative “freedom of navigation” incursion into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea. The Labor Party Defence

spokesperson Stephen Conroy has insisted that Australian warships should be ordered to carry out their own operation—an action that could result in a direct clash between Australian and Chinese military forces.

Di Natale’s speech serves to underscore the duplicity of the Greens. Under conditions of widespread opposition to Australia’s renewed involvement in war in the Middle East and emerging awareness of the tensions in Asia, he has sought to distance the Greens from the commitment by Labor and the Coalition to the US alliance. The Greens are positioning themselves to try and posture as an “anti-war” party when the inevitable opposition erupts to the surface.

His comments were all the more striking, given that, in their 2010 and 2013 federal election campaigns, the Greens said next to nothing about war, and nothing about the US alliance.

At the same time, Di Natale signaled that the Greens, while making some noise about the US alliance, will continue to enforce the conspiracy of silence that prevails in the Australian establishment over just how closely the country has been integrated into the US preparations for a military confrontation with China. This has been a taboo subject for close to five years, precisely because of the fears of popular outrage.

As far as the official establishment is concerned, even the limited criticisms made by Di Natale of Australia’s alignment with Washington were considered beyond the pale. Most television news and newspapers simply did not report the contents of his speech, or omitted his statements on the US alliance.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian*, however, felt obliged to remind the Greens that, should they form part of the next government, they will be expected to give their full support to the US alliance and militarism. In its editorial today, it bluntly warned: “In the unfortunate event Australians found the Greens in a power-sharing alliance with Labor after July 2, nobody, including party leader Richard Di Natale, could surely expect their absurd proposal to back away from the US alliance, the bedrock of Australia’s strategic policy for 75 years, would ever see the light of day.”



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