

# Trump dresses down Australian prime minister

Mike Head  
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In what appears to have been a calculated leak from the highest echelons of the White House, US President Donald Trump reportedly “blasted” Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull during a phone call last weekend and then abruptly cut off the call.

According to the details first published by the *Washington Post* yesterday, Trump fumed at Turnbull for asking him to honour an Obama administration refugee-swapping deal with Australia. In line with his demonisation of refugees, Trump labelled it “the worst deal ever” and accused Turnbull of trying to export the “next Boston bombers” to the US.

Trump went further, however, telling Turnbull that their conversation was the “worst by far” of the five phone calls he had that day with world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin. After 25 minutes, Trump suddenly ended the scheduled one-hour call “making it far shorter than his conversations with Shinzo Abe of Japan, Angela Merkel of Germany, François Hollande of France or Putin,” the newspaper reported.

The leaked content of the conversation exposed Turnbull’s insistence that it “ended cordially” and the fraud of Foreign Minister Julie Bishop’s earlier claims that the call was “very warm” and “very engaging.” Turnbull yesterday said he was “very disappointed” that details of the call were leaked.

Clearly, however, this was not merely a personal slight to Turnbull. It was a deliberate warning shot to his government and the entire Australian political establishment about the future of its post-World War II military alliance with the US. Sitting in the Oval Office monitoring Trump’s call was his chief strategist, the fascist Stephen K. Bannon, Trump’s militarist national security adviser Michael Flynn and White House press secretary Sean Spicer.

Yesterday, Trump reiterated the wider bellicose “America First” message, to US allies and rivals alike. In

a speech, he told a Washington audience that the world was in a mess, but he was “going to straighten it out.” He declared: “When you hear about the tough phone calls I’m having, don’t worry about it... We have to be tough. It’s time we have to be a little tough, folks. We are taken advantage of by every nation in the world virtually. It’s not going to happen anymore.”

Earlier in the day, gangster-like, Trump said he “loved Australia as a country” but had “a problem” with the refugee deal. His spokesman Spicer reiterated that Trump was “unbelievably disappointed” about the “horrible deal” and refugees would be allowed in the US only if they passed “extreme vetting.”

In reality, this draconian screening was already central to the agreement stuck with the Obama administration last year, which was designed to reinforce the reactionary anti-refugee policies on both sides of the Pacific. Not one of the more than 2,000 refugees incarcerated indefinitely by Australia on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island is guaranteed entry into the US.

Trump’s bullying treatment of Turnbull has thrown the Australian government and the media and political elite into turmoil because it makes brutally clear that the new administration’s belligerence has ominous implications. This is not least because Washington is reportedly pressing for a far greater military commitment from Canberra, particularly in the Middle East and the South China Sea.

In return for US military and strategic protection, Australian governments have sent troops to kill and die in every major US-instigated war for the past six decades—from Korea and Vietnam to Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. But much more is now being required as the Trump White House seeks to “make America Great again” against its rivals, including China and Germany.

Largely buried in the Australian media is what the White House has demanded of Turnbull’s government, or

is soon likely to, in return for the refugee-swap arrangement. In today's *Australian*, editor-at-large Paul Kelly noted: "If the deal proceeds Trump, as a transactional president, will seek a quid pro quo at some point on some issue. And Turnbull, aware he has used up his political capital, will agree."

On Wednesday, citing unnamed "senior US sources," the *Australian* reported that the Trump administration had agreed, after lobbying from Canberra, to amend its sweeping anti-immigrant executive order to allow for the "pre-existing" refugee-swap agreement.

But the White House was "not happy" and "made no secret that Australia would ultimately be expected to reciprocate." One source said: "The favour won't be called in straight away ... but some sort of reciprocity will come eventually. And that is likely to come in the form of freedom-of-navigation exercises [in the South China Sea] or the deployment of special forces to Iraq."

Under Turnbull's ousted predecessor, Tony Abbott, the Liberal-National government sent war planes and other military forces to join the renewed US war in Iraq, under the guise of combatting the Islamic State. Dispatch of special forces to join US ground forces would signal a marked escalation of the ongoing US drive for hegemony over the resource-rich Middle East.

Until now, the Turnbull government, while carefully toeing Washington's line, has not followed the US in sending warships or planes into the territorial zones around islets under China's control in the South China Sea, under the bogus pretext of defending "freedom of navigation." The Obama administration conducted three such provocative operations, which heightened tensions with Beijing and intensified the danger of a war between the US and China, two nuclear powers.

Trump and his newly-confirmed Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have threatened to block China's access to the islets, which would be an act of war. Such a conflict could have disastrous consequences for the Australian capitalist class, which relies heavily on China as its largest export market.

Trump is now taking to a new level pressure on Canberra that was initiated under Obama, as part of the US military and strategic "pivot to Asia" to combat and prepare for war against China. In mid-2010, when then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd proposed that the US make some accommodation to China's economic growth and rising influence, he was deposed in a backroom Labor Party coup orchestrated by elements close to the US embassy, including current Labor leader Bill Shorten.

Barack Obama himself sent blunt warnings to Turnbull, who was initially somewhat critical of the "pivot" when Obama announced it on the floor of the Australian parliament in 2011. Last September, the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) reported that Turnbull, because of his past business interests in China, was "not trusted" by Australian intelligence agencies. Two months later, media leaks revealed that during a one-on-one meeting in Manila, Obama had rebuked Turnbull for failing to consult Washington before a Chinese corporation was awarded a 99-year lease to operate Darwin's commercial port.

Today, the Australian media is full of alarm and foreboding about the implications of Trump's dressing down of Turnbull, including the impact it will have on the already falling public support for the US alliance.

AFR chief political correspondent Phillip Coorey wrote: "If Trump continues treating Australia like dirt, public support for doing anything to help the Americans, including letting them keep their troops based in Darwin, let alone following them on any frolic in the South China Sea, will quickly wane."

Professor James Curran of the US Studies Centre at Sydney University—a centre dedicated to overcoming public hostility to the US after the 2003 Iraq invasion—voiced concerns of what lies ahead. "If you have this sort of tension this early in the life of the administration over relatively small beer, what will happen in the event of a major crisis?"

Others within the media and political establishment, while not calling for a break from the US alliance, are casting doubt on its reliability. Fairfax Media political editor Peter Hartcher today declared it was time to "wake up, Australia!" The "moment of alliance shock" could "jolt Australia into doing more for itself" and "the country might mature from a state of adolescent dependency on America into a more adult state."

Such statements are part of efforts in the ruling elite to divert public opposition to the Trump administration in a reactionary nationalist direction by advocating a more "independent" foreign policy to assert the interests of the Australian ruling class.



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