Australian government boosts pro-US institutes on eve of ministerial talks in California

Mike Head
25 July 2018

The Australian government on Monday announced a new $12 million four-year funding grant to two affiliated think tanks, the United States Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney and Perth USAsia Centre (USAC) at the University of Western Australia.

Just three weeks earlier, the government pushed through parliament, with the opposition Labor Party's help, two draconian bills criminalising so-called "foreign interference" that are directed especially against China.

Now it has handed millions in additional funding to institutions that are specifically tasked with intervening in Australian political, military and economic affairs on behalf of the US—making clear the one-sided character of the new legislation.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Marise Payne, joined by two other senior cabinet ministers, announced the grant under the heading: "Deepening our relationship with the United States."

The media release came just before Bishop and Payne took part in the annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN). The discussions are being held in California this year, on July 23 and 24.

At the meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary James Mattis, the Australian delegation was expected to come under increased pressure to step up the country's involvement in war preparations against China. In particular, this could include requests to provocatively send Australian warships and planes inside territorial waters claimed by Beijing around islets in the South China Sea.

The Liberal-National Coalition government established the USSC in 2007, and gave it a $25 million seed grant, aimed, in particular, at overcoming popular hostility to the US alliance stemming from Australian participation in US-led wars after the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Labor government of Julia Gillard then expanded the USSC's work, as part of its embrace in 2011 of the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia to undermine China, and initiated the USAC, a Western Australian affiliate, in order to extend the focus to the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

These institutions, which are also funded by major corporations, have been very active. The USAC web site boasts of convening "more than 400 high-calibre events across 16 cities in 8 countries" since it began operations in 2014.

Nevertheless, popular sentiment against Australian involvement in US-instigated wars has not shifted. A USSC survey last year found that 61 percent of Australian respondents thought US influence in the region over the next five years would be "negative."

The authorities in Washington and Canberra clearly consider it necessary to ramp up the efforts of its pro-US think tanks, especially with the aggressive trade war and other "American First" measures of the Trump administration throwing new question marks over the post-World War II US alliance.

This week's funding announcement provided an indication of the Turnbull Coalition government's anxiety to satisfy Washington's demand in order to protect Australian capitalism's own profits and predatory interests in the Indo-Pacific.

"The relationship between Australia and the United States is of utmost importance to our future," the ministers' media release stated. "As strategic dynamics

© World Socialist Web Site

in the region change, our relationship with the United States takes on even greater salience."

The ministers referred to Australia's growing "need for quality public outreach, informed scholarship and incisive commentary about the United States."

In reality, the USCC was established explicitly to produce pro-US reports, media commentary, school programs and other material to counter public opposition to the US alliance.

The USCC was founded after a meeting of the New York-based American Australian Association (AAA) in 2006, where media magnate Rupert Murdoch pointed to polling results showing that 57 percent of the Australian population viewed American foreign policy as a potential threat. Murdoch reportedly declared: "This is ridiculous, what are you blokes going to do about this?"

The AAA will administer the latest grant. It is overseen by prominent Australian business figures in the US, such as Murdoch, former Ford CEO Jacques Nasser, ex-Philip Morris CEO Geoff Bible, former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, Dow Chemical chairman Andrew Liveris, Westfield co-CEO Peter Lowy and golfer Greg Norman.

Australia is already integrated into the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, formally announced by President Barack Obama from the floor of the Australian parliament in 2011. Gillard's Labor government agreed to a new US Marine presence and expanded access to other bases in northern Australia, as well as greater military "interoperability."

The Gillard government also provided the USSC with $2 million to establish a research project, entitled "Alliance 21," to examine how to strengthen the alliance.

That was less than a year after Kevin Rudd was ousted as prime minister in an inner party coup by a handful of Labor and union powerbrokers, who, as WikiLeaks later revealed, were "protected sources" of the US embassy. The Obama administration was hostile to Rudd's suggestions that the US make a limited accommodation to China's rise.

As well as popular hostility, there are concerns in some sections of the Australian ruling class about the wisdom of a confrontation with China, which is Australia's largest export market. These layers, however, are increasingly marginalised as the Turnbull government lines up ever more closely with Washington.

Just before the latest AUSMIN talks commenced, Murdoch's *Australian* ran an "exclusive" front-page report that a "senior US congressman" had called on Australia to conduct its own provocative "freedom-of-navigation operation" (FONOP) inside a 12-nautical mile exclusion zone around one of the reefs China occupies in the South China Sea.

Joe Courtney, a Democrat from Connecticut, sits on Armed Services Committee sub-committees and co-chairs the Friends of Australia caucus in congress. He said it might be "a little bit scary" for Australia to take such a step, but it was "a big priority" for the US, in order to send a message to Beijing about the resolve of US allies.

Foreign Minister Bishop deflected Courtney's call, saying it would be "an extraordinary step" for Australia to conduct such an operation against China "when we have never conducted one anywhere." But she said Australia would continue to "step up the tempo" of sending ships and planes through the South China Sea in international waters.

Until now, the Turnbull government has resisted calls to follow the US in conducting so-called "freedom of navigation" operations that risk a military clash and could escalate into a far broader conflict.

The author also recommends:

US Studies Centre touts significance of US-Australian investment ties
[4 July 2017]

Sydney University's US Studies Centre: A bastion of pro-war strategy and propaganda
[2 June 2016]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site