

US and Australian ministers agree to intensify military integration against China

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Strengthening close military ties, directed against China in particular, was the axis of the annual US and Australian defence and foreign ministers' (AUSMIN) meeting in San Francisco this week.

After the talks, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described the US-Australian alliance as “rock solid,” while US Defense Secretary James Mattis declared: “The US and Australia will walk the walk in the Indo-Pacific.”

Pompeo explicitly named China as a supposed threat to peace and America's post-World War II dominance in Asia. “We have spent a lot of time over the course of the last two days talking about how to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific,” he said. “That emanates from a lot of places—certainly China poses concerns there.”

The joint Australia-US ministerial (AUSMIN) statement was short on detail, but strongly reaffirmed the military alliance. It began by endorsing a declaration by President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the White House in February, when they proclaimed a “steadfast and enduring” alliance dating back to World War I.

“From the battlefields of Europe to this contested century, there are no greater friends than Australia and the United States,” the statement insisted. The Australian signatories were Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Marise Payne.

One of the few specific commitments was to confirm the “full implementation” of “Force Posture Initiatives” between US and Australian forces in Australia. These include raising the number of US Marines in the northern city of Darwin to the full complement of 2,500 “as soon as practicable.”

Pompeo later emphasised the importance of this Marine taskforce in an Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV interview, saying it was ready to be sent. At full strength, the Marines in Darwin will constitute a full Marine Corps Expeditionary Unit (MEU), backed by naval and air

power, that can be rapidly deployed in the region. This is part of Pentagon's build-up and restructuring of military forces throughout Asia aimed against China.

The current size of “Marine Rotation Force Darwin is 1,587, with eight Osprey aircraft for rapid troop movements. It is already the largest annual rotation since the Gillard Labor government signed an agreement with the Obama administration in 2011, providing for a staged increase to 2,500.

The AUSMIN statement pledged “Enhanced Air Cooperation for improving the interoperability of US and Australian defense forces,” integration of “US force elements into Australia's annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour exercise” and strengthened “bilateral security partnerships with like-minded Indo-Pacific nations through joint training and exercise opportunities.”

On the sensitive question of Australia joining the US in conducting provocative “freedom of navigation operations” (FONOPs) inside the 12-nautical-mile territorial zones claimed by China around its islets in the South China Sea, however, no agreement was apparently reached.

The Turnbull government remains reluctant to participate in these aggressive US operations, initiated under Obama, because of their potential to trigger direct clashes that could lead ultimately to full-scale war with China.

Mattis indicated that the issue was raised, as had been anticipated before the meeting, but said it was up to Australia to decide. “That's a sovereign decision by a sovereign state,” he said.

In the lead-up to the talks, Bishop had publicly rejected a US congressman's call for such an Australian FONOP, as “an extraordinary step” for Australia to take.

Nevertheless, the AUSMIN statement reiterated support for the US position of opposing China's alleged “militarization of disputed features in the South China

Sea” and conducting operations to enforce “the obligation to respect freedom of navigation and overflight.”

A significant added component of the statement, compared to previous AUSMIN communiqués, was to highlight moves toward forming a so-called quadrilateral alliance. This would bring India into the existing anti-China alignment of the US, Japan and Australia. The ministers “welcomed the recent US-Australia-India-Japan consultations on the Indo-Pacific in Singapore.”

Other pledges involved strengthening military collaboration in science and technology, including “advanced” cyber warfare capabilities, and stepping up military, intelligence and economic activity in South Pacific island countries.

There were also commitments to maintain military forces in Afghanistan and Syria, and “continue cooperation” in combatting terrorism in Southeast Asia—the pretext for sending US and Australian forces into the Philippines last year.

Another focus was “increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation on economic development in the Indo-Pacific.” Efforts are being made to counter the impact of China’s growing investment and aid across the region, and especially its massive “One Belt One Road” infrastructure plan to link China to Europe.

A supplementary “fact sheet” said the US and Australia intended to work together to “advance a shared infrastructure agenda, including by holding a formal dialogue on infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific.”

The fact sheet added two further joint pledges. One is to “maintain pressure on North Korea until it abandons its illegal WMD and ballistic missile programs.” This means enforcing the crippling US sanctions on North Korea and preparing to intervene militarily if Pyongyang fails to meet Washington’s demands for unilateral nuclear disarmament.

The other is to “coordinate efforts to counter foreign interference in their respective countries.” This is a reference to the draconian “foreign influence” legislation pushed through the Australian parliament last month to criminalise political collaboration with overseas organisations, as well as anti-war dissent. The passage of this legislation was demanded by Washington’s political and security establishment, which regards it as a model for similar anti-democratic measures in the US and elsewhere.

Before the AUSMIN talks, Bishop delivered a speech in London that pointed to rising concern in ruling circles in Australia and internationally, including among post-

World War II US allies, about the Trump administration’s bellicose “America First” trade war and strategic threats.

One of the greatest dangers to the post-war order, Bishop stated, was that “the United States is now favouring a more disruptive, often unilateral, foreign and trade policy that has heightened anxieties about its commitment to the rules-based order that it established, protected and guaranteed.”

Another major “challenge facing the international order” was that “it must accommodate a changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.” Bishop noted: “China is Australia’s largest trading partner, and that of probably over 120 other nations around the world... China is contesting the United States’ role in the region through tactics that fall short of direct confrontation.”

Bishop stated: “The United States-China trade dispute is one manifestation of a larger struggle between the world’s existing superpower and a growing economic and strategic power. The global economy and global stability will feel the impact of this for some time to come.”

This is an unusually frank and revealing statement of the fundamental geo-strategic tensions once more pushing capitalism toward another world war. It will certainly have been noted in Washington in the lead-up to the AUSMIN talks.

Bishop’s only proposal was to call for closer British engagement in the Indo-Pacific. “Acting together we can better support the United States to lead in ways that advance all of our mutual interests, in ways that support the rules-based order.”

Thus, while nervous about the openly belligerent course of US policy under Trump, the Australian ruling class sees no option but to tighten its commitment to Washington, on which it has relied for military and strategic backing since World War II.



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