

Australia backs Trump as US ramps up anti-China drive

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As the Trump administration intensifies its economic and strategic confrontation with China, the push for a more aggressive Australian stance is also escalating. Successive Australian governments have already integrated its military into the provocative US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region that began under President Obama's "pivot to Asia".

The Trump administration has upped the ante in the trade war with China. In a bellicose speech by US Vice-president Mike Pence earlier this month, he accused China of interfering in American politics in addition to the litany of charges over the South China Sea, Taiwan, and alleged stealing of hi-tech secrets. The speech was a deliberate escalation of what is being termed more and more as a new "Cold War" with China, which US allies such as Australia and Japan are being pressured to join.

The consequences of Australia's alignment with the US were highlighted in a comment in Monday's *Australian* by Paul Dibb, former deputy defence secretary and Defence Intelligence Organisation director. He seized on Pence's speech to argue that Australia had to respond by massively bolstering its military capacities in preparation for the prospect of a war against China.

Dibb cited the comments of American historian Walter Russell Mead who last week likened Pence's comments to Ronald Reagan's speech in 1981 branding the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." Mead posed the question—did the second Cold War just break out while no one was watching? Having concluded that the confrontational US strategy ultimately threatens war, Dibb, a key figure in the Australian strategic and intelligence establishment, called for the Australian government to take a series of diplomatic, economic and military steps.

Firstly, Dibb backed the Trump administration to the hilt, declaring that Canberra must acknowledge that "the US is at last doing something positive to challenge Chinese hegemony in our part of the world." He then effectively branded China as an enemy, stating that Australia faces "for the first time since World War II a major power—with which we do not share fundamental values—capable of threatening us with high-intensity conflict."

In preparation for conflict, Dibb declared that Australia must reduce its economic dependence on China, pull its military forces back from Afghanistan and the Middle East to focus on Asia, and adopt a more aggressive, confrontational approach to China in line with the Trump administration.

In an ominous threat, Dibb stated: "China needs to understand if it succeeds in ending the US alliance system in Asia, that may well encourage former allies to consider acquiring nuclear weapons. Is that what Beijing wants?" Earlier this month, he wrote a comment entitled "Should Australia develop its own nuclear deterrent?" which he concluded by declaring that "my view is that Australia should at least be looking at options and lead times" for building nuclear weapons.

Dibb's remarks are part of an intense discussion in Australian think tanks and military and intelligence circles over the need to accelerate preparations for what can only be a devastating regional and global war. In a keynote speech last month, Dibb warned: "If a fully-blown trade war results, the world will stumble into a moment of great geo-political uncertainty. When this happened to the world in the 1930s the results were disastrous, including for Australia."

The same day as it published Dibb's comment, the *Australian*, the flagship newspaper of the Murdoch

media empire, lambasted an editorial in the state-owned *China Daily* which criticised moves by Australia and Japan to strengthen military ties with each other and asserted that the US could tip the region into conflict. The Chinese editorial warned Canberra and Tokyo “not to allow the resurgence of the Cold War paranoia that has already taken hold of the US, [to] shape their actions.”

It declared that political leaders “should realise the full significance of a return of the full-scale mistrust of the Cold War, as it will create a fragile peace that risks being shattered by the slightest mis-step.” It urged them not to let the US “lead them by the nose as it pursues a confrontational strategy toward China that is really not in their best interests.”

The *Australian* editorial responded by defending the announcement by Canberra and Tokyo that they will hold joint aerial war games in northern Japan next year, as well as the “right” of the US, Australia and Japan “to demand and ensure freedom of navigation for vital sea lanes.” In reality, freedom of navigation operations to challenge Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea are simply a pretext to conduct naval exercises in close proximity to the Chinese mainland, including near its sensitive naval bases on Hainan Island.

Facing escalating US trade war and military measures, Beijing is seeking to counter Washington by pointing out that the confrontation risks economic disaster for countries such as Japan and Australia that are heavily dependent on trade with China.

Australia, however, is remaining firmly aligned with the US. To date, it has been reluctant to join the US military in its provocative freedom of navigation operations. However, the *Australian* noted on Monday that Trump’s National Security Adviser John Bolton asserted that US allies were going to participate. “The British, the Australians and others, are sailing with us through the South China Sea. We’re going to do a lot more on that,” Bolton declared.

A Reuters article has also revealed the expanded collaboration of the so-called Five Eyes intelligence network against China. According to unnamed sources, the grouping, which includes the US and Australia, Britain, New Zealand and Canada, is now sharing information on alleged Chinese political “interference” with other countries, including Germany, Japan and to

a lesser extent France. The article asserted that the US and its allies were developing “a broadening international front against Chinese influence operations and investments.”

The rising tensions between the US and China underscore that one of the main reasons for the recent ousting of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister was his failure to take a tougher stand against China. Even though his government rammed through draconian anti-foreign interference legislation directed against China, Turnbull called for a “reset” of policy towards Beijing and an improvement in what had been tense relations. There is no doubt that such a stance was unacceptable to Washington and the layers of the Australian political and military establishment that back its war drive against China.



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