

Australia: Morrison-Turnbull clash points to sharp foreign policy tensions

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An extraordinary public conflict last week between Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his ousted predecessor Malcolm Turnbull highlighted the rifts wracking the ruling Liberal-National Coalition.

Morrison accused Turnbull of violating his instructions while representing the government at a conference in Indonesia. In response, Turnbull essentially branded Morrison a liar. Within hours, Morrison was forced to retract his charge, fuelling recriminations by his “hard right” supporters in the Liberal and National Party leaderships.

Significantly, last Thursday’s clash erupted over a major issue of foreign policy, triggered by Morrison’s efforts to align the country even more closely with Washington. The previous month, Morrison proposed to follow the Trump administration in its incendiary decisions to move the US Israeli embassy to the contested city of Jerusalem and to tear up the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran.

Without consulting Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne or her department, Morrison declared that both policies would be reviewed, and made clear his support for taking Trump’s lead.

The corporate media depicted Morrison’s announcement as an electoral ploy—a cynical bid to pick up Jewish votes for the October 20 by-election in the seat of Wentworth. While crass electoral calculations were no doubt involved, the move was far more significant.

Morrison’s proposals, if implemented, would make Australia one of the few countries in the world to follow Trump’s aggressive path in stoking the danger of a new conflict with Iran in the Middle East. They would also reverse policies reaffirmed by Turnbull before he was removed, via an internal Liberal Party coup, on August 24.

While Turnbull had bent over backward to ingratiate himself with Trump and accommodate to the US

president’s “America First” drive to assert global supremacy, he had drawn the line on those two issues, adhering to the position of the European and other powers, including China. Just before he was removed, Turnbull also tried to “reset” relations with China, Australia’s largest export market, while still maintaining the primacy of the post-World War II military and strategic alliance with the US.

In what initially appeared to be a surprise move, just after the government’s disastrous loss of Turnbull’s former seat in the Wentworth by-election, Morrison appointed Turnbull to head a delegation to an “Our Oceans” conference in Bali. That appointment caused an outcry in the Liberal Party’s most right-wing faction, with another deposed former prime minister, Tony Abbott, protesting that Turnbull had refused to support the party’s candidate for the by-election.

As last week’s events revealed, Morrison specifically asked Turnbull to attend the conference in an attempt to mend relations with President Joko Widodo’s government. Joko had expressed concern at the mooted shift of Australia’s Israeli embassy to Jerusalem, reflecting widespread outrage in Indonesia.

Last week’s open fight began when Morrison told Alan Jones, a right-wing talkback radio host, that the former prime minister had exceeded his “brief” in Bali.

After a meeting with Joko, Turnbull said the Indonesian president had “expressed to me, as he has done to Prime Minister Morrison, the very serious concern held in Indonesia about the prospect of the Australian embassy in Israel being moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.”

For good measure, the ex-prime minister added that his government had seriously considered such a step, but rejected it on expert advice.

Morrison told Jones he would never send Turnbull on a diplomatic mission again, because those issues “were not really part of the brief.” Beating a nationalist drum, he

declared that the determining factor in the embassy decision would be Australia's "national interests," not those of any other country.

Turnbull soon took to Twitter. "A few facts. @ScottMorrisonMP asked me to discuss trade and the embassy issue in Bali and we had a call before I left to confirm his messages which I duly relayed to @jokowi," he tweeted. "There was a detailed paper on the issue in my official brief as well."

Morrison had to beat an embarrassing retreat. He issued a three-line statement, conceding that Turnbull was briefed on, and approved to discuss, trade and the Israeli embassy at the Bali gathering, if they were "raised in direct conversations."

Nevertheless, Morrison insisted that an official review of the policies on Israel and Iran would proceed, pointing to his anxiety to not upset the Trump administration.

The official sensitivity to Indonesia's reaction partly relates to the fact that an Indonesia-Australia "comprehensive economic partnership agreement," which has taken eight years to negotiate, is due to be signed within weeks, and then must be ratified by the Indonesian parliament.

Beyond the prospect of Australian corporate profits, however, the Indonesian regime is pivotal to the US drive to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, and to Australian efforts class to forge other alliances as the US-China conflict intensifies.

These anxieties found expression in an October 30 *Australian Financial Review* editorial. "Right now Australia is facing its biggest foreign policy challenges in generations, as our two largest partners are increasingly at loggerheads," it warned. "Australia seeks to hedge a more assertive China with closer relations with others in south-east Asia who share concern at Beijing's power—and who also worry at the reliability of Washington's 70-year hegemony in the region."

The Morrison-Turnbull clash further points to the pressures behind Turnbull's ouster. It marked a lurch to the right, both to seek to stir up nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiment to divert growing working class discontent, and to prepare for a US-led war against China.

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While the potentially devastating consequences for Australian capitalism of a war between its "two largest partners" is causing worry and schisms in ruling circles, Turnbull's replacement by Morrison signals a turn to reinforce the US alliance.

Yesterday, just hours after his conflict with Turnbull, Morrison delivered his first prime ministerial speech on foreign policy. In it, he ticked all the boxes required by Washington, outlining a militarist agenda, and also made clear he intended to pursue Australian imperialism's own predatory activities in the region.

"Inevitably, in the period ahead, we will be navigating a higher degree of US-China strategic competition," Morrison said. He then emphasised that the "alliance with the United States is a choice we make about how best to pursue our security interests" as China exercises "unprecedented influence in the Indo-Pacific."

The prime minister foreshadowed challenging China in the South China Sea, reiterating "Australia's enduring interest in ensuring that freedom of navigation and overflight are respected by all states." He boasted of "undertaking the largest regeneration of the Royal Australian Navy since the Second World War" and vowed to make the Pacific "one of my highest foreign policy priorities."

Morrison confirmed a pact with Australia's former colony, Papua New Guinea, to construct a joint naval base on the strategically located Manus Island, formalising an earlier announcement designed to cut across Chinese hopes of developing such a base.

Turnbull, who reflects the interests of sections of the financial and corporate elite that depend heavily on China, is not going away, however. He will appear in an hour-long special episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Q&A" program next Thursday night—his first major media interview since he lost the prime ministership.

There is no possibility that Turnbull will discuss, or even be asked about, the real domestic and global factors behind his knifing. His very appearance, however, will exacerbate the differences tearing apart the Coalition.



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