

At APEC, PM puts Australia on frontline of US confrontation with China

Peter Symonds

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has placed the country on the frontline of the mounting US confrontation with China, which was on open display at last weekend's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG).

US Vice President Mike Pence exploited the opportunity to launch a savage attack on China and its policies throughout the region, including its "militarisation" of islets in the South China Sea, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure plans for Eurasia, and alleged theft of intellectual property. He warned that unless "China changes its ways," the US would continue to escalate its massive tariffs on Chinese goods.

Pence's speech marked a sharp escalation, not only in US trade war measures against China, but in its military build-up in Asia in preparation for war. For Australian capitalism, the geo-political standoff has dire implications, since it continues to depend militarily on the US alliance, and financially on Wall Street, yet China remains its largest trading partner.

In his comments, Morrison absurdly maintained that "Australia doesn't have to choose and we won't choose" between the US and China. Despite Pence's aggressive speech, the prime minister maintained that rifts between the world's two largest economies would be patched up when President Trump met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Argentina at the end of the month. The deep divide between the US and China is underscored by the fact that the APEC summit failed to issue a joint communique, for the first time in its 29 years, due to the failure of the two powers to agree on the wording.

In reality, the Morrison Liberal-National Coalition government, like previous Coalition and Labor governments, has already chosen to unambiguously side with the US as it prepares for trade war and war with China. The Australian military is closely integrated with

US forces throughout the region. Moreover, new basing arrangements, agreed by the Gillard Labor government, give US Marines, as well as warships and military aircraft, access to bases in northern Australia.

Australia and New Zealand have functioned as junior partners of US imperialism in the South West Pacific, where both countries have had their own neo-colonial interests, ever since the end of World War II. PNG is a former Australian colony and Australian military forces virtually took over Port Moresby during the past week, in the name of providing security for the APEC summit. The Australian navy stationed a huge helicopter carrier, accompanied by patrol boats in the harbor, while Australian warplanes and helicopters patrolled the skies and hundreds of troops, including elite special forces, were stationed on land.

In a lengthy private discussion with Morrison, Pence welcomed the Australian government's major new assistance package for the Pacific island states, announced just weeks ahead of the APEC meeting. The plan includes \$1 billion to support Australian business ventures in the region, \$2 billion in infrastructure loans, a boost to defence collaboration, the establishment of five new diplomatic missions and a push to get Australian broadcast media into the Pacific. While Morrison declared that the initiative was not targeted against any other country, no one has any doubts that the aim is to undermine Chinese influence.

In the course of the APEC summit, Australia, the US, Japan and New Zealand signed an agreement with the PNG government to connect power and internet services to 70 percent of the country's population by 2030. The deal is a direct challenge to a Chinese bid, and part of a broader joint infrastructure strategy in Asia to undermine China's BRI plans, which Pence denounced for drowning its partners in "a sea of debt."

In a major new step to boosting the US military

presence in the region, the US announced that it would join Australia and PNG in establishing a joint base on Manus Island, off the PNG northern coast—undermining a Chinese proposal to build a port there. Due to its strategic location, Manus Island was the site of a huge US base during World War II, directed against Japan. An article in the *Australian* gloated that the US and Australia would now have access to a “vital deepwater port, which has a sweeping command of Australia’s maritime approaches [and] is big enough to accommodate aircraft carriers and has anchorage capacity for hundreds of ships.”

The Labor opposition has already given bipartisan support to Morrison’s moves. Its foreign affairs spokeswoman declared that the party welcomed the government’s “long-overdue recognition of the importance of the Pacific” and backed “initiatives to work with like-minded countries to bring reliable power” to PNG. She also welcomed “America’s commitment to work together with Australia and PNG on the development of the Manus naval base.”

The Australian media left no doubt as to the significance of the confrontational stand taken by the US, and allies like Australia, at the APEC summit. Peter Hartcher’s article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, entitled “Frontline in US-China power struggle reaches Australia’s doorstep,” drew the parallel with the halt of Japan’s advance towards Port Moresby by allied troops during World War II.

“The Pacific campaign in World War Two was an allied, US-led effort to halt the apparently unstoppable advance of the Japanese Imperial Army on its mission to establish the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Today’s campaign is an allied, US-led effort to halt the apparently unstoppable Chinese Communist Party on its mission to create what its leader, Xi Jinping, calls a Community of Common Destiny.”

Hartcher was the author, in 2016, of a virulently anti-Chinese article denouncing Chinese interference in Australia and branding politicians, businessmen, ethnic Chinese citizens and Chinese students as pests that needed to be eradicated. The article was part of a surge of anti-Chinese propaganda, which culminated in sweeping legislation against “foreign interference” that seeks to outlaw opposition to any confrontation and war with China. The draconian legislation sets a new benchmark for laws under consideration in the US and other countries.

The propaganda campaign continues as the government and media attempt to manufacture justifications for

Australia’s engagement in the US war drive. Yesterday, the *Australian Financial Review* published an extensive article alleging a surge in hacking by Chinese spies seeking commercial secrets of Australian companies. No evidence was provided, beyond the unsubstantiated claims of unnamed intelligence sources—that is, the same agencies that made the claims of “Chinese interference.”

At the same time, the Australian government is blocking Chinese investment, in what it claims is key infrastructure. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced this week the official rejection of a \$13 billion bid by Hong Kong-listed CK Infrastructure for gas pipeline giant APA Group, citing national interest concerns. The government has previously blocked any involvement by Chinese companies, Huawei and ZTE, in the rollout of the 5G telecommunications network.

The intensified US conflict with China, signalled by Pence at the APEC summit, sheds further light on the ousting of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in an inner party coup in August. While Turnbull had supported the Trump administration’s anti-China stance and backed the foreign interference laws, his willingness to wholeheartedly support a further stepping up of the confrontation was in question. Reflecting the view in Washington, former Trump adviser Steve Bannon told the ABC that Turnbull was “too much of an appeaser” towards China.

Bannon also underscored the strategic importance of Australia to the US in its hostilities with Beijing, describing it as “the tip of the spear in the Pacific.” Morrison, who has already lined up fully with the Trump administration in suggesting Australia might shift its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem, fully committed at the APEC summit to Washington’s reckless war drive against China.



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