

Confrontation with China focus of Australian prime minister's state visit to Washington

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison has arrived in Washington to begin an eight-day state visit to the United States. Accompanied by the most senior foreign affairs, military and economic advisors of his government, the Australian prime minister is slated to hold top-level meetings with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Vice President Mike Pence and several personal discussions with President Donald Trump. A joint press conference has been scheduled for Friday morning US time.

While the American press has barely noted Morrison's visit to the US, the Australian media has gushed that it is "historic." Trump has accorded the Australian leader a ceremonial White House "welcome," a one-hour meeting with his entire cabinet and a formal state dinner. In his entire presidency, Trump has only staged one other such affair, for French President Emmanuel Macron in April 2018.

Australian analysts have freely admitted that the reason for the state dinner is that the US establishment and the Trump administration, in particular, are entirely confident that nothing contrary to American policy will be raised by Morrison.

The Australian leader, in other words, is rightly viewed in the White House and the Pentagon—and in the corridors of power everywhere else—as a pro-Trump sycophant who heads one of the most compliant pro-US states in the world.

Prior to Morrison's visit, his Liberal-National Party Coalition government agreed to send a warship and other military assets to take part in the US operations to threaten Iran in the Persian Gulf, on the pretext of defending "freedom of navigation." Australia sides with the US on every significant issue, from its effort to prosecute Australian citizen and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, to diplomatic support for every crime

committed by the Israeli state against the oppressed Palestinian people, to the demonisation and vilification of Russia, Venezuela and Iran.

Australia was among the only countries that contributed military forces to the illegal invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq and is part of the "Five Eyes," along with the US, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, which, as Edward Snowden exposed, spies on the communications of its own citizens and the governments and citizens of virtually every other country.

Perhaps most importantly from Washington's standpoint, Morrison is committed to increasing Australian participation in the US confrontation with China over geo-strategic and economic domination of the Indo-Pacific region.

The Greens-backed Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard put Australia on the frontline of the US preparations for war with China in November 2011. Gillard provided President Barack Obama with the floor of the Australian parliament to announce the provocative US "pivot to Asia." Labor entered into agreements for the deployment of US ground troops on Australian soil for the first time since World War II; the expanded use of northern Australian ports and airfields by the US Navy and Air Force; a major expansion of the key spy and nuclear weapon targeting base at Pine Gap; and a new space surveillance and war-fighting facility at North West Cape, which is scheduled to open in 2020.

Liberal-National governments since 2013 continued and expanded Labor's foreign policy alignment, just as Trump has seamlessly continued and expanded the aggressive US policy toward China initiated under Obama.

Morrison will sit down with Trump and his officials

under conditions in which the US is waging a trade war against Beijing, with the explicit aim of plunging the Chinese economy into crisis. In the last three weeks, the US Navy has twice sent a warship into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea to assert so-called “freedom of navigation,” with the implicit intention of provoking a clash with the Chinese military.

In regard to the South China Sea, the advice to Morrison from the pro-US fraternity is that he should volunteer to send Australian own warships to join the American operations. In parliament on Monday, Liberal Party Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, an anti-China hawk and right-wing demagogue, stated: “We should be calling out Beijing, utilising our Navy and working with other countries to exercise right of innocent passage through international waters. Appeasement should never be an option.”

Analyst Peter Jennings, from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), and *Australian* foreign policy editor Greg Sheridan have both suggested that Morrison also offer to base a US aircraft carrier battle group in the Western Australian port of Stirling, to better assert American hegemony in the Indian Ocean.

On the issue of trade war, Morrison is being strongly advised by Australian commentators to say nothing that could be construed as criticism of the Trump administration—despite the prospect that the developing slump in China could drastically impact on multi-billion dollar Australian exports of iron ore, coal, gas and other raw materials.

Before leaving Australia, Morrison flagged that he has taken on board that advice and that Trump will only hear what he wants to hear. He told parliament on Wednesday: “In a complex world, in a complicated world, a world of strategic competition, a world of great uncertainty, our partners and our allies are of great importance... We are an alliance partner that the United States knows it can rely on... that pulls its weight in the alliance.”

The US-Australia military alliance is underpinned not by nostalgia about fighting side-by-side in World War I and World War II, let alone with the claims of “mateship” across the Pacific. US-Australia relations are predicated on, and aggressively seek to protect and extend, immense corporate interests and profits.

A recent shareholder analysis, for example, estimated

that the 20 largest companies listed on the Australian stock exchange are majority owned by US-based investors—banks, merchant banks, investment funds and private individuals. These largely American-owned companies include the once state-owned Commonwealth Bank of Australia and the four other major banks; the once state-owned telecommunications giant Telstra; the retail giants, Woolworths, Wesfarmers and Westfield; and the mining conglomerates that generate vast profits from raw material exports to China such as BHP, Rio Tinto, Woodside Petroleum and Fortescue Metals.

Total American investment in Australia exceeds \$1 trillion. Australian corporations and individuals have some \$720 billion invested in the US—nearly 10 times more than they have invested in China.

Among those invited to sit down with Morrison and Trump at the state dinner are some of the largest Australian investors in American assets. At the top of the list is the Murdoch family, who gave up their Australian citizenship when they shifted the headquarters and focus of their media empire to the US. Both 88-year-old Rupert Murdoch and Lachlan Murdoch are expected at the dinner.

Second in line is manufacturing billionaire and Trump supporter and personal friend Andrew Pratt, whose main companies are Visy and Pratt Industries. Next Tuesday, Morrison and Trump will travel with Pratt to Wapakoneta, Ohio, to open a new Pratt Industries paper recycling plant. Also expected to attend are the mining industry billionaires Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest, media magnate Kerry Stokes and Telstra head Andy Penn.

Business opportunities that may flow from Morrison’s visit include the development of rare-earth mining on a large scale in Australia, Telstra’s involvement in joint 5G projects with US companies in competition with Chinese giant Huawei and contracts for Australian companies to participate in next generation space technologies.



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