

Australian government seeks to place country on war footing

Mike Head
4 July 2020

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison this week invoked the spectre of another world war when he unveiled an aggressive military expansion, clearly aimed against China.

In an address to military cadets, Morrison announced that despite the deepest economic breakdown since the 1930s Great Depression, causing mass unemployment and social misery, \$575 billion will be spent on boosting the military over the next decade.

While falsely presented as “defensive,” an expanded \$270 billion military hardware build-up features “long-range strike capabilities.” These will start with the immediate purchase of US missiles capable of striking Chinese vessels and facilities in southeast Asia, and which could be reconfigured to hit southern China itself.

“We have not seen the conflation of global, economic and strategic uncertainty now being experienced here in Australia, in our region, since the existential threat we faced when the global and regional order collapsed in the 1930s and 1940s,” Morrison declared. He described the return of these conditions as “very haunting.”

This invocation of an “existential threat” was an obvious reference to World War II, during which the US provoked Japan into a war for control over the Pacific that led to Japanese attacks on US warships in the port of Darwin. Japan, which is an imperialist power, was accused of trying to invade Australia. Such a claim is now being directed, without any evidence, against China.

Morrison’s remarks were uttered in the context of a mounting mobilisation by US imperialism, headed by the Trump administration, to confront China economically and militarily, to block it from ever challenging America’s post-World War II dominance. This is the driving force of the escalating confrontation with China.

The Liberal-National Coalition prime minister identified the Indo-Pacific as the likely arena for a global war. “Our region will not only shape our future, increasingly though,

it is the focus of the dominant global contest of our age,” he said. Relations between China and the United States were “fractious” because “they compete for political, economic and technological supremacy.”

First under Barack Obama and now Donald Trump, successive Australian governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have placed Australia on the frontline of any war against China, including by stationing US marines in Darwin and increasing US access to northern Australian air and military bases. This week’s announcement marked a further, even more explicit, shift toward military conflict against China.

In an effort to condition public opinion for war, Morrison painted a picture of Australia and the Indo-Pacific region under attack by China. Without any evidence whatsoever, he essentially accused Beijing of conducting “grey” warfare via “coercive activities,” “disinformation and foreign interference” and “cyber attacks.”

In fact, the prime minister claimed that a military line had been crossed already. “The threshold of traditional armed conflict in what experts call the grey zone, which is becoming ever present and ever expanding,” he asserted.

Morrison did not specifically name China, but his target was palpable, as every media and military-intelligence commentator pointed out. Yet he offered not the slightest evidence to back his vague and sweeping allegations.

Recent weeks have seen totally unsubstantiated claims by the government and the corporate media of Chinese “cyber warfare” and “foreign interference.” No details of “cyber attacks” have been provided, except admissions that the alleged attackers used software readily available on the internet.

As for “foreign interference,” a state Labor MP was last week labelled a “Chinese agent” by the media and raided by the federal police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) for making comments

critical of the US-led demonisation of China.

In reality, the US ruling elite is the greatest source of “cyber warfare” and “foreign interference” in Australia. That was underlined recently when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that the US would “simply disconnect” Australia from its telecommunications, military and intelligence networks if any Australian government made an agreement with China deemed to endanger US “national security.”

Morrison specifically referred to rising “tensions over territorial claims” on China’s borders, including the South China Sea, and declared: “The risk of miscalculation and even conflict is heightening.”

But it is the US, backed by Australia, that has conducted repeated military provocations inside the territorial waters around Chinese-claimed islets in that sea ever since 2010. That was when the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had a “national interest” in determining who controlled the outcrops, thousands of kilometres from the United States.

Again, without the slightest evidence, Morrison claimed that Australia’s “sovereignty” was threatened by China and sought to wrap himself in the cloak of a wartime leader. “Sovereignty means self-respect, freedom to be who we are, ourselves, independence, free-thinking. We will never surrender this. Never. Ever.”

Morrison underlined the Australian ruling class’s commitment to the “ever-closer alliance with the United States,” saying it “is the foundation of our defence policy.” He insisted: “The security assurances and intelligence-sharing and technological industrial cooperation we enjoy with the United States are, and will remain, critical to our national security.”

This pledge was made despite rising concerns in some ruling circles about the continued reliability of the US as a military protector, given its economic and political decay, and anxiety over the loss of the Chinese markets on which mining and agricultural companies depend heavily.

Morrison sought to overcome this nervousness by emphasising Australia’s own re-militarisation. In order to be “a better and more effective ally,” Australia had to “be prepared to invest in our own security,” as well as still being ready to “make military contributions outside of our immediate region” in “support of US-led coalitions.”

So far, Beijing’s response to the Australian build-up has been muted, reflecting the Chinese regime’s hopes of averting a potentially catastrophic nuclear war with the US and its allies. But an article in the state-controlled *Global Times* on Friday said analysts had noted the

specific weapons that Australia will acquire were “obviously” not for defence within Australian borders but for “long-range” combat.

Morrison yesterday boasted to the *Australian’s* editor-at-large Paul Kelly that his government had “crashed through” the target of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on the military—a proportion demanded of all “allies” by Donald Trump.

Regardless of the economic crash triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the soaring budget deficits and government debt, the government was “not going to be constrained by 2 percent.” Australian Strategic Policy Institute strategic analyst Marcus Hellyer estimated that defence funding would grow by 7.2 percent, 9.2 percent and 9 percent in the three years from 2020–21. “What other portfolio can boast such largesse?” he asked Kelly.

In his column, Kelly hailed Morrison’s bid to ideologically prepare the population for war. “Morrison has warned the Australian people the deepest recession for decades now runs in parallel with a heightening risk of military conflict as the sinews of regional prosperity face ‘almost irreversible strain,’ demanding a revamped defence posture and strategy.”

An editorial in the Murdoch-owned newspaper even claimed that Beijing’s crackdown in Hong Kong justified war against China. “China’s police-state takeover of Hong Kong has been compared to Adolf Hitler’s ominous absorption of Austria within the Reich,” it stated. “This strikes at freedom and prosperity in our part of the world.”

Speaking on behalf of big business, an *Australian Financial Review* editorial also backed the military “build-up,” saying it was “a reminder that the days of risk-free coasting on China boom prosperity are over. Just as in defence, we need to face up to much-needed policy reforms, rather than putting them off because they are difficult.”

In other words, the offensive against China must be matched by one at home, extracting the cost of militarisation and the pandemic-triggered economic breakdown from the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)