US demands even greater support from Australia in confrontation with China

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In the lead-up to annual US-Australian (AUSMIN) ministerial talks in Washington DC next week, the Trump administration is insisting that the Australian government must step up its already frontline role in the escalating US offensive against China.

The demands include a more aggressive participation in the US provocations in the strategic South China Sea, near where five Australian warships last week joined a US aircraft carrier task force and a Japanese naval vessel in a display of force near Chinese-occupied reefs. The Australian flotilla then sailed near the Chinese-claimed Spratly Islands on its way to join US-led "RIMPAC" military exercises in Hawaii.

Despite the intensifying COVID-19 danger in the US, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Linda Reynolds will personally attend the AUSMIN session in Washington, with US counterparts Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper. Payne and Reynolds will even have to quarantine for two weeks on their return.

Last Thursday, Pompeo called for all "free nations" to rise as one against Chinese "tyranny," regardless of the economic consequences. Pompeo did not mention Australia or any other country by name but he said some US allies were afraid of confronting China because they feared economic retribution.

Pompeo's message was reinforced by the US ambassador to Australia, Arthur B. Culvahouse, who told a United States Studies Centre (USSC) gathering in Sydney this week: "US investment is critical to Australia's future prosperity." He warned against trying to separate "economic security" from "national security," adding: "It's not just about the money."

Seeking to contrast Australia's ties with China with those of the US, Culvahouse claimed that China was guilty of economic intimidation, but "Australia will never see the day when a US ambassador threatens to withdraw from trading with and investing in Australia." In reality, his remarks constituted a thinly-veiled threat.

Culvahouse hailed as "extraordinary" and "brilliant" a report commissioned by the big business American Chamber of Commerce in Australia, which concluded that the US was far more important to Australia economically than China, recently outdoing Chinese investment by 40 percent.

The report said the US had become the largest single foreign investor in Australia, with a total of $984 billion as of 2019—more than a quarter of all foreign investment. Australian exports to the US and the income generated from US investments in Australia contributed $131 billion a year, or 7 percent of Australia's annual economic growth.

In effect, the report highlighted the vulnerability of Australian capitalism to economic, as well as military, pressure from the US. It noted that even before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's public and private debt to the rest of the world was $1.1 trillion. "In order to recover, Australia knows it must and will have access to US capital markets," which were "the deepest" in the world.

In a video message to the same USSC event, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought to reassure the Trump administration of his government's reliability. He said the relationship between the two countries "has never been stronger and it has never been more important."

Morrison said Australia was "a trusted partner of the United States" but "we don't leave it to the US. We do our share of heavy lifting in this partnership. We lead. We pull our weight."

Likewise, on the eve of their departure for the AUSMIN talks, Payne and Reynolds published an

article in the *Australian* saying the consultations had "never been more important." The pair echoed the Trump administration's escalating barrage of provocative allegations against Beijing.

Without providing the slightest evidence, they accused China of "coercive conduct" and "militarisation" in the South China Sea, conducting cyber attacks, imperilling the internet, spreading fake news, "undermining the rights, freedoms and futures of millions of people" in Hong Kong and threatening the sovereignty of other countries.

Payne and Reynolds emphasised the Liberal-National government's boosting of military spending. They said "our $270 billion investment in defence capability over the next decade, including in more potent, longer-range capabilities," would "allow us to make even stronger contributions to the alliance and achieve greater combined effects with US forces to deter aggression and respond with military force."

The Australian military and intelligence agencies are already helping feed the US propaganda offensive against China. Last week, they immediately backed the unsealing of a US indictment against two Chinese former engineering students on trumped-up charges of hacking, supposedly in order to steal data on COVID-19 vaccine research.

The indictment claimed that during the past decade the pair also had targeted an unnamed defence contractor and a solar business in Australia "for profit," while sometimes helping China's Ministry of State Security.

Despite the lack of any evidence to back the vague accusations, the Australian Signals Directorate—the partner agency of the US National Security Agency—was joined by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Home Affairs in issuing a statement welcoming "actions designed to hold malicious cyber actors to account."

This is a bipartisan alignment. The opposition Labor Party's shadow assistant minister for cybersecurity, Tim Watts, jumped in to urge the government to go further to protect "our critical infrastructure and businesses" from "cybersecurity threats."

Under both Liberal-National and Labor governments, the Australian ruling class has increasingly committed itself to Washington's drive to undermine China and preventing it from threatening the US dominance established by victory in the last world war. This did not begin with the Trump administration, although it is dangerously ratcheting up the potentially catastrophic conflict.

Australian troops have been sent to join every major US military intervention since the Korean and Vietnam wars and continuing through to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The last Labor government signed up to the Obama administration's military "pivot" to Asia to confront China, and agreed to station US marines in the strategic northern city of Darwin.

Since taking office in 2013, the Liberal-National Coalition—with Labor's support—has come to the forefront of the anti-China campaign, including by imposing precedent-setting "foreign interference" laws that can criminalise links with China or involvement in international anti-war activity.

The Australian Federal Police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the internal political spy force, recently activated these laws to raid the home and parliamentary office of a New South Wales state Labor MP, Shaoquett Moselmane, amid media headlines accusing him, without any substantiation, of being a "Chinese agent." In what was an intimidating warning to the entire political establishment, Moselmane, who protested his innocence, was forced to suspend himself from parliament.

Pompeo's speech and the summoning of Payne and Reynolds to Washington signal a demand for much more. As a middling imperialist power strategically dependent on the US, the Australian ruling elite is being given no option but to play a bellicose role in the US war drive, irrespective of the fallout caused by its heavy dependence on exports to China.

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