

Bipartisan Australian move to ban agreements with China

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On Thursday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison suddenly announced legislation to effectively overturn or prohibit agreements struck by Australian state governments and universities with China or Chinese institutions. Addressing the National Press Club on the same day, opposition leader Anthony Albanese declared that the Labor Party was “very supportive of” the bill.

As a result, the as-yet unseen laws could be pushed through both houses of parliament by next week, the end of the current rare fortnight sitting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While Morrison denied that the Foreign Relations Bill is aimed solely against China, it clearly marks a further sharp shift to align unequivocally behind the Trump administration’s increasingly aggressive confrontation with Beijing.

Morrison announced the bill amid a series of bellicose anti-China speeches by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and an accompanying media witch hunt, spearheaded by Rupert Murdoch’s outlets.

The logic of banning agreements with China is that of making further preparations for a war launched by the US against China. Australia would be on the frontline of such a war because of its geographic location, hosting of US bases and integration into the US military and intelligence war machine.

As has been widely reported, the first target of the Liberal-National government’s bill is a vague memorandum of understanding (MOU) that the Victorian state Labor government signed in 2018 to consider partnering in infrastructure projects as part of China’s international Belt and Road program.

Yesterday’s editorial in Murdoch’s *Australian* was blunt. “Scott Morrison’s preparedness to tear up Victoria’s Belt and Road agreement with China and take control of the deals with foreign powers by universities and lower tiers of government is a vital assertion of national sovereignty,” it stated.

As with the “foreign interference” laws adopted in 2018,

also with Labor’s backing, the new bill will place Australia at the forefront of setting precedents for legislation outlawing links with China. The new measures are far-reaching, affecting every level of government, right down to sister-city arrangements and university research and exchange agreements with Chinese or other universities.

Morrison said the government already had drawn up a list of more than 130 agreements, from 30 countries, to be vetted. There was no suggestion, of course, that the list includes the vast web of military, intelligence, diplomatic and research agreements that governments and universities have with the US government and American institutions.

The new law will formally give the foreign minister a sweeping discretion to veto any existing agreement or negotiations on prospective ones. According to media reports, the minister can bar a “negotiation or arrangement” that is likely to “adversely affect Australia’s foreign relations” or “be inconsistent with Australia’s foreign policy.”

At his media conference, Morrison declared the government’s intent to tear up targeted agreements. [I]t’s a pretty clear test—if they’re inconsistent with federal foreign affairs policy, they’ll go,” he said.

At the National Press Club, Albanese was equally assertive, saying “the idea that the national interest should be looked after by the federal government when it comes to foreign policy is something that we’re very supportive of.”

On the part of both the ruling parties, there is an element of nationalist diversion from the domestic COVID-19 disaster. In Australia, the bipartisan national cabinet is presiding over a rising death toll—now exceeding 600—that is concentrated in the chronically-underfunded aged care and public health systems.

This response parallels that of the Trump administration, which is resorting to anti-Chinese demagogic to blame a foreign “enemy” for the COVID-19 calamity in the US, while vying with the Democratic presidential candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden, to be the most strident in doing so.

But the move to ban agreements with China is overwhelmingly driven by Washington's ramping up of its underlying geo-strategic conflict with China. The US ruling elite is insisting on an unconditional Australian alignment against Beijing, regardless of the dependence of major capitalist interests on iron ore, coal and other exports to China.

Morrison's announcement came four weeks after the latest Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) issued a declaration that broadcast all the Trump administration's incendiary allegations against China—from “coercive and destabilising actions across the Indo-Pacific” to “malicious interference” in other countries.

The AUSMIN meeting also announced the construction of a large US military fuel reserve in the strategic northern city of Darwin—where US marines have been stationed since the previous Greens-backed Labor government agreed to that in 2011—and a classified military “Statement of Principles” to “advance force-posture cooperation” against China.

At those talks in Washington, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Linda Reynolds recited the actions that the Australian government had taken already in sync with the US. The list included banning the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from Australia's proposed 5G network, opposing China's Belt and Road program, introducing “foreign interference” laws, blocking Chinese investment in certain industries, and denouncing Chinese actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

It also included declaring “illegal” China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, collaborating on the mining and refining of “critical minerals” and allocating an extra \$270 billion over the next decade to boosting Australia's military capacity, especially for longer-range operations in China's vicinity.

The further sharp turn against China can be gauged by the fact that in 2017, the previous Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull, sensing lucrative possibilities, signed its own MOU with China to cooperate in third countries on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

Morrison's ouster of Turnbull in August 2018 signalled a shift to a more unconditional alignment behind the US military alliance. Despite Turnbull's own repeated statements of attachment to the US alliance, he was regarded in Washington as insufficiently committed.

In 2015, President Barack Obama had personally reproached Turnbull for failing to provide Washington with advance notice that a Chinese corporation was to be awarded a 99-year lease to operate Darwin's commercial port. Obama's reprimand highlighted the alarm in US ruling circles over any action that could cut across US war plans and underscored the real source of “foreign interference” in

Australia—that of US governments and financial giants.

Even so, when the Victorian government originally signed its BRI MOU in November 2018, Payne and other Morrison cabinet ministers spoke approvingly of it. Payne told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “We obviously seek opportunities to strengthen engagement with China on regional trade and infrastructure development projects, and that includes the BRI, where those align with international best practices.”

As recently as May 2019, Morrison himself said his government was “neutral” on the BRI and sought to facilitate and encourage Australian companies to participate.

This attempt to maintain profitable relations with Chinese capitalism has become increasingly untenable. The Trump administration has taken to a new threatening level the Obama administration's military and strategic “pivot to Asia” to prevent China from challenging the regional and global hegemony established by the US in World War II.

A wartime-like atmosphere is being created. All this week, the *Australian* published a stream of unsubstantiated accusations that individually-named scientists and academics at Australia universities “are giving the Chinese Communist Party access to their technology and inventions in return for generous second salaries of up to \$150,000, funded by China, and other benefits.”

This witch hunt is a threat to global research cooperation and academic freedom, free speech and other basic democratic rights. It is also another warning sign of preparations for a potentially catastrophic US-led war against China.



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