

Ex-Australian PM conducts provocative visit to Taiwan

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In another sign of an escalating US-backed confrontation with China over Taiwan, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made a highly-publicised trip to the island this week, where he accused Beijing of preparing to attack the territory.

During a speech and media appearances, Abbott issued a series of inflammatory statements. He not only charged China with “aggression” toward Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a renegade province of China, but declared that a military assault was possible at any time.

Abbott, who led Australia’s Liberal-National Coalition government for two years from 2013 to 2015, claimed that because of internal problems in China, it was “quite possible that Beijing could lash out disastrously very soon.”

Abbott effectively called for military measures by the US and its allies to counter any alleged Chinese threat. “Taiwan’s friends” had to “let Beijing know that any attempt at coercion would have incalculable consequences.”

Officially, the Australian government adheres to the “One China” policy by which the US and its partners recognised Beijing in 1979 as the sole legitimate government of China as a whole, including Taiwan, primarily in order to open up China as a cheap labour platform for transnational profit-making.

However, following the lead of Washington, first under Trump and now Biden, the Australian government is undermining the “One China” policy and deliberately inflaming tensions with Beijing.

Abbott became the first ex-Australian prime minister to hold a meeting and joint media conference with a sitting Taiwanese president. His trip was billed as a private one, but had all the hallmarks of being endorsed by the Australian government, acting in collaboration

with the Biden administration.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government gave Abbott a travel exemption from COVID-19 restrictions to make the journey. In his meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen, Abbott was accompanied by Australia’s top diplomat in Taiwan, Australian Representative Jenny Bloomfield.

Moreover, Morrison defended Abbott’s visit, as did Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce and other senior ministers, along with Malcolm Turnbull, who ousted Abbott as prime minister in 2015. As another indicator, the Murdoch media’s *Australian* published Abbott’s speech to a Taipei think tank forum in full.

Abbott’s intervention also followed last month’s announcement of the AUKUS alliance between the US, UK and Australia, a military pact directed against China that included the supply of nuclear-powered attack submarines to Australia, and the first-ever in-person meeting of the leaders of the Quad—the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—a quasi-military alliance against China by the US, Japan, India and Australia.

Abbott himself placed his visit in the context of the Biden administration’s intensification of the US backing for Taiwan. “The State Department has just affirmed that the US commitment to Taiwan is ‘rock solid,’” he said.

“I don’t think America could stand by and watch Taiwan [be] swallowed up. I don’t think Australia should be indifferent to the fate of a fellow democracy of almost 25 million people.”

As prime minister, Abbott became so unpopular that he lost his own parliamentary seat at the 2019 federal election. Nevertheless, he claimed to be speaking on behalf of the people of Australia.

In reality, polls indicate that only about one-third of

the population would support Australian military intervention in Taiwan, despite an escalating anti-China campaign by the political and media establishment.

In his speech to the “Yushan Forum,” Abbott reeled off the lengthening list of unsubstantiated allegations made against China by the US, including that it had “put upwards of a million Uighurs into concentration camps,” “brutalised Indian soldiers in the Himalayas,” “coerced other claimants in its eastern seas” and “flown ever-more intimidatory sorties against Taiwan.”

Likewise, Abbott accused China of “weaponising” trade, “especially against Australia” by citing safety concerns over barley, wine and coal exports and by publishing “14 demands.” These “demands,” Abbott declared, would mean “we become a tributary state,” thus invoking the spectre of China seeking to reduce Australia to a vassal status.

In fact, the 14 grievances documented multiple actions taken by Australia against China, such as banning many Chinese investments, barring Huawei, the technology giant, from 5G telecommunications contracts, and introducing foreign relations laws that give the Australian government power to veto state or local government agreements with China.

Abbott’s incendiary remarks went beyond what the Biden administration has yet done in terms of semi-official visits to Taipei. In June, a bipartisan contingent of three US senators conspicuously travelled there in a large US military plane for a joint appearance with President Tsai, but that was depicted, however fraudulently, as a humanitarian mission to announce the donation of COVID-19 vaccines to the island.

Abbott’s trip underscores Canberra’s function in acting as a spearhead for Washington in the Indo-Pacific against China, a role that Morrison boasted of at the G-7 summit in the UK during June. Morrison claimed credit for the fact that the G7 communiqué explicitly denounced China, unlike previous G7 statements.

The ramping up of tensions over Taiwan was foreshadowed in the communiqué issued by the annual US-Australian ministerial (AUSMIN) talks. It again undermined the “One China” policy by extolling “Taiwan’s important role in the Indo-Pacific region” and stating the intent of both Washington and Canberra to “strengthen ties with Taiwan, which is a leading democracy and a critical partner for both countries.”

Last week too, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) featured an extraordinary interview by commentator Stan Grant with Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, in which Grant urged Wu to openly ask the Australian government for military support for a possible conflict with Beijing.

The *Global Times*, one of Beijing’s official outlets, yesterday condemned Abbott’s trip and the ABC interview as “increasingly worrying signs of further acts of recklessness from Canberra.” It noted: “On the Taiwan question, Australia has been playing the role of a daring vanguard for the US, helping Washington test the regional waters to gauge China’s tolerance and test China’s responses.”

Another damning feature of Abbott’s visit was the contrast with 2014, when the then-prime minister hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping to announce a “comprehensive strategic partnership” and finalise a free trade agreement. Abbott hailed Xi’s visit to Australia as “a remarkable few days for the life of our country.”

For three decades, successive Australian governments cynically courted the Chinese regime, seeking to exploit China’s economic growth to extract super-profits, particularly through the export of iron ore, coal and natural gas. This has made China the biggest export market for Australian capitalism by far.

However, as the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations have stepped up US efforts to block China from ever challenging the regional and global hegemony that Washington obtained via World War II, Australian governments have increasingly committed themselves to US war preparations. They are placing the population on the frontline of a potential nuclear war, despite the widespread anti-war sentiment reflected in the opinion polls.



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