

US Secretary of State demands greater Australian involvement in war drive against China

By Oscar Grenfell
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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used a visit to Sydney last weekend for annual Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) to issue bellicose denunciations of China and to demand greater Australian involvement in Washington's aggressive confrontations with Beijing and also Iran.

Pompeo and US Defence Secretary Mark Esper were feted by the Liberal-National Coalition government, the Labor Party opposition and the corporate press, underscoring Australia's complete alignment with the US war drive in the Asia-Pacific and internationally.

The AUSMIN talks followed the official US withdrawal last Friday from the INF treaty, which placed restrictions on its deployment of medium and long-range missiles.

Speaking in Sydney, Esper immediately signalled that the Pentagon would deploy missiles prohibited under the treaty "sooner rather than later." His remarks made clear that the US plans to encircle China with missiles, potentially carrying nuclear weapons, dramatically raising the danger of war in the region.

Both US officials stressed Australia's central role in this war drive. Speaking to the media on Sunday alongside Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Linda Reynolds, Pompeo described the US-Australia alliance as an "unbreakable relationship." The comment was an unmistakable warning that Washington will not tolerate any deviation by Australia from its plans.

"Let me be clear, the United States is a Pacific nation," Pompeo declared. "We care deeply about what happens here, and we're here to stay." The secretary of state called for greater joint action between the US and Australia in the region.

Pompeo hailed Prime Minister Scott Morrison's "Pacific step-up," involving an expanded military and

security presence in small island states in the South West Pacific, and large investment, aimed at shoring up Australian and US dominance at the expense of China.

Over the course of just two days, Pompeo and Esper made a series of provocative remarks directed against Beijing. They accused China of militarising the South China Sea and aggressively seeking to expand its influence in the region, and repeated the talking points used by the Trump administration to justify its aggressive trade war measures against Beijing.

Payne and other Australian government representatives echoed these accusations, which turn reality on its head. In fact, it is Washington that is recklessly carrying out a vast military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific, consolidating aggressive military alliances with states throughout the region and carrying out economic attacks on China that are unprecedented since the 1930s.

Payne declared that she "shared" the "US vision" for the region, saying: "It's important to reinforce that without strong US engagement, the region that we all want, the region we need, can't be achieved." Labor MPs, including the party leader Anthony Albanese, also fawned over the US secretary of state.

In closed-door meetings with Morrison, Pompeo formally requested that the Australian government participate in a US military build-up in the Persian Gulf directed against Iran. Under the pretext of protecting commercial shipping, Washington is massing warships as part of a military build-up for an attack on Tehran.

Reynolds stated that the government would give "very serious consideration" to the request, which will reportedly be discussed at a cabinet meeting today. Her response demonstrated the Australian ruling elite's willingness to join another predatory US regime-change operation and war in the Middle East aimed at securing

resources and US geo-strategic dominance.

The request also underscored Australia's key role as a junior partner of American imperialism under conditions of open rifts over Middle East policy between the Trump administration and erstwhile US allies including Germany and France.

Australian media reports suggested that Esper and Pompeo would request permission to base missile systems on the Australian mainland. Articles today claimed that Morrison had "ruled out" the stationing of such weapons systems. In reality, Payne and the prime minister merely said that no such formal request had yet been forthcoming.

In reality, Australia is already at the forefront of the US military build-up in the region. The so-called joint intelligence base at Pine Gap base in central Australia is involved in the spying and the coordination of American military operations throughout much of Eurasia and Africa. The base automatically involves Australia in any US war in the Asia-Pacific.

Moreover, in 2011, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard dramatically expanded US basing arrangements as part of its alignment with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." This included the establishment of a new US base in Darwin to station up to 2,500 American Marines, increased use of existing Australian bases by US warships, and the further integration of the Australian military into the US war machine.

Under the US Air-Sea battle doctrine, Australia's key function in the event of a US war with China would be to enforce a naval blockade aimed at key straits that pass through Indonesia and the Pacific, with the aim of starving Beijing of vital resources. That could include military operations in the South China Sea where the US has been pressing Australia to challenge China's maritime claims.

Pompeo's transparent campaign to further these war preparations provoked concern from some sections of the media establishment. Speaking for layers of the corporate elite, they are fearful that Australian involvement in the Trump administration's trade war measures, and its military provocations against Beijing will jeopardise lucrative economic relations with China.

Pompeo was posed with a question along these lines after an address he delivered at the Centre for Independent Studies on Sunday night. The secretary of state responded bluntly declared: "Look, you can sell your soul for a pile of soy beans or you can protect your

people."

Peter Hartcher, the political and international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* also published an opinion piece today, warning against Australian involvement in the Persian Gulf. His position, however, was that military hardware and personnel should be concentrated in the Asia-Pacific, to confront China.

The dominant position of the Australian political establishment, of unalloyed support for Washington's provocative actions around the world, was summed up in an article by Paul Kelly, editor at large of the *Australian*, headlined "Unbreakable Pacific alliance now 'more vital than ever'."

Kelly wrote: "Anybody who thinks Australia did not long ago take sides and continues to take sides on a daily basis in the US-China strategic rivalry lives in dreamland. The sheer weight of strategic infrastructure means this will not change."

He continued: "Events in the past few days have been critical. The US-Japan-Australia trilateral meeting in Thailand quickly followed by the AUSMIN meeting in Sydney sent a sharper message that China's strategic assertion must be combatted by a region-wide response that includes economic and security imperatives."

The comments, along with the support for Pompeo throughout the political establishment, is a warning that behind its back, the Australian population has been placed on the frontlines of a confrontation with China that threatens the eruption of a catastrophic nuclear war.

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