

Following AUSMIN talks, Australian politician compares China to Nazi Germany

By James Cogan
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Within days of the latest AUSMIN meetings—the annual ministerial-level talks on strategic and military matters between Australia and United States—Andrew Hastie, a prominent Liberal-National government member, launched a diatribe over the supposed “threats” posed by Chinese “interference.”

Hastie’s missive was welcomed by other anti-China figures within the political and media establishment, while provoking internal tensions and an official protest from the Chinese embassy.

Hastie, a 36-year-old former Special Forces officer who served multiple tours in Afghanistan and the Middle East, was only elected into parliament in 2015. He has had a rapid rise within the Liberal Party, however, due to his Christian social conservatism and pro-US militarism. He was elevated in 2017 to chairperson of the influential Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. Along with Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, he was a key member of the right-wing cabal that engineered the ousting of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in August 2018 that led to the installation of Scott Morrison.

In a comment published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other Nine Media newspapers on August 8, Hastie asserted that Australia faced an “agonising security and economic balance act,” due to its reliance on trade with China, under conditions in which Beijing was attempting to “supplant” the US and dominate the Indo-Pacific. He claimed Australia’s “sovereignty, security and democratic convictions” were threatened by China, requiring the laws against “espionage, foreign interference and influence” that were rammed through parliament by the Coalition and Labor Party in June 2018. “But there is more to be done,” Hastie declared.

Hastie falsely compared the purported failure of Australia to respond to the threat posed by China with France’s lack of response to the “German advance in

1940”—in other words, with the military onslaught across Europe launched by the Nazi regime.

Seeking to incite anti-communist hysteria—and ignoring the capitalist character of the Beijing regime—Hastie asserted that Chinese President Xi Jinping adhered to “Marxist-Leninism” ideology and his “view of the future is one where capitalism is eclipsed.”

Hastie concluded: “The next decade will test our democratic values, our economy, our alliances and our security like no other time in Australian history.”

Taken at face value, such a statement is a call for a massive increase in military spending and operations, and the suppression of all political and social opposition—as took place during World War II, when, arguably, the Australian ruling class faced the greatest “test” to its imperialist interests.

The Chinese embassy responded with a press release the same day, saying it “strongly deplored” Hastie’s rhetoric that “lays bare his Cold War mentality and ideological bias” and “is detrimental to China-Australian relations.”

Australian and some international media featured Hastie’s comments and the Chinese reaction. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation headlined its coverage: “Liberal MP Andrew Hastie condemned by China after comparing Beijing’s rise to threat from Nazi Germany.” The *Wall Street Journal* headline was: “Australian lawmaker compares China’s rise to Nazi Germany’s.”

The self-serving and ahistorical comparison of contemporary China with German imperialism and Nazism is not Hastie’s brainchild. For a decade, it has been repeatedly made in US and Australian strategic documents to justify the aggressive US “pivot,” or military build-up, to maintain its dominance over the Asia-Pacific region, including through the expansion of American bases and operations in Australia.

The US conducts military interventions globally, pursues confrontational military and economic policies against China, and threatens Beijing with a web of alliances and its massive conventional and nuclear arsenal. But every response by China is denounced as “expansionism.”

This was the theme of the AUSMIN talks in Sydney on August 3–4. Using the venue to announce the deployment of nuclear-capable missiles across the region, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper declared at a press conference: “We stand firmly against a disturbing pattern of aggressive behaviour, destabilising behaviour, from China.”

Hastie’s positions echo the Trump administration’s bellicose rhetoric. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told the media that “the time is right for the United States and Australia to do much more together in the region and beyond.” He named “China’s militarisation of their man-made islands in the South China Sea” as one issue of joint “concern.”

The ruling elite in Australia has been riven for over a decade as a result of mounting pressure from Washington to fully align with the US efforts to cripple China before it ever emerges as a genuine challenge to American geo-strategic and economic dominance. Amid sometimes bitter internal conflicts, the pro-US faction has prevailed, with the behind-the-scenes backing of the military and intelligence apparatus. Australian foreign policy, under successive Labor and Coalition governments, has proceeded in lockstep with Washington, both under Obama and Trump.

As Hastie asserted, however, “there is more to be done,” as far as the pro-US wing in Australia is concerned. They want Canberra to agree to the Trump administration’s request to participate in the US-led confrontation with Iran and a naval operation to control the Straits of Hormuz, through which a large proportion of China’s energy imports transit each day. They support the expansion of US military operations in Australia, including the possible stationing of missile systems in the country’s north and more frequent use of Australian ports by warships and submarines.

Asked whether Hastie’s remarks would have been “music to the ears” of Trump, US ambassador to Australia Arthur B. Culvahouse gloated: “I think that’s fair to say, yes.”

The Morrison government and the political establishment as a whole are nevertheless cautious in how openly they attack China, because any retaliatory

economic measures by Beijing could trigger a severe recession.

From this standpoint, some figures have criticised Hastie’s statements. Finance Minister Mathias Cormann labelled them “a bit clumsy and inappropriate.” Labor’s shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus called them “extreme” and “unwelcome.”

Such criticisms provoked a public defence of Hastie by Home Affairs Minister Dutton, who declared: “Andrew’s privy to a lot of information and intelligence briefings that other members of Parliament aren’t... It [China] is an important trading nation but foreign interference in our country is at an all-time high... We are worried about influence on university campuses. We are worried about the theft of intellectual property.”

Underscoring the Labor Party’s undying support for the US military alliance, Anthony Byrne, Hastie’s deputy chair of parliament’s intelligence and security committee, sprang to his defence, saying: “If anyone has earned the right to articulate his views about threats to Australia’s security, that young man has earned his right by his service to our country.”

Both Hastie’s and Dutton’s statements point to an immediate issue that the anti-China hawks want addressed: the failure of the police agencies to use the draconian “foreign interference” laws. To date, no one has been prosecuted for purportedly being a Chinese “agent of influence.”

Hastie named “our parliaments,” “universities,” “private enterprises” and “charities” as areas where people should be subjected to scrutiny. Prosecutions would be exploited to heighten the manufactured hysteria over the threat from China, as well as to intimidate and silence opposition to the broader militarist agenda.

The author also recommends:

Australia’s new “foreign interference” laws: A threat to anti-war dissent

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