

Establishment figures welcome renewed anti-China hysteria in Australia

By James Cogan
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Australian politicians, prominent strategic analysts and media commentators have welcomed last week's denunciation of China by Andrew Hastie, a former special forces' officer. He is a member of the extreme right faction of the Liberal-National Coalition government and chairperson of the influential Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security.

In a column published August 8, Hastie compared the purported failure of Australia to defend itself against the "threats" posed by China with the "failure" of France in 1940 to adequately prepare for military invasion by Nazi Germany. He hailed the draconian legislation passed through parliament last year, by a bipartisan Coalition-Labor opposition vote, to target "espionage, foreign interference and influence" in Australian politics and society.

Hastie then bewailed the "thinking" behind what he implied was a lack of action over China's influence in the "parliament," "universities," "private enterprises" and "charities." Hastie left little doubt he wants the laws used, with active repression, arrests and prosecutions.

Hastie's article was published in the wake of the August 3-4 Australia-US ministerial (AUSMIN) forum, at which Secretary of Defense Mark Esper accused China of "aggressive" behaviour. Under conditions of rapidly rising US-China strategic and economic tensions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that "the ANZUS alliance is unambiguous" in obliging Australia to support the US in times of war.

As Hastie and his advisors most likely intended, his assertions have reignited the longstanding debate in the Australian establishment on whether it can "balance" between its military alliance with United States and its lucrative exports of natural resources to China.

The Chinese embassy responded to Hastie's column with an official protest, labelling his statements as "detrimental to China-Australian relations." Finance Minister Mathias Cormann and Trade Minister Simon Birmingham mildly criticized Hastie for making "clumsy" and unhelpful comments that could affect trade relations.

Opposition Labor Party defence spokesman Richard Marles called them "incendiary." Mark McGowan, Labor premier of Western Australia, from where vast quantities of iron ore are exported to China, condemned the article's comparison with Nazi Germany as "extreme and inflammatory."

The predominant reaction, however, has been praise for Hastie's effort to stoke anti-China hysteria, branding Beijing as aggressive and destabilising, rather than the US, which is engaged in an economic war and military build-up against China in the region.

Mark Byrne, Labor's deputy chair of the parliamentary committee that Hastie heads, dismissed the concerns over potential economic repercussions: "The Australian parliament shared Andrew's concerns when it passed foreign interference and anti-espionage laws last year... I would agree with the fact that we're facing—and I think our intelligence agencies are saying—that we're facing unprecedented levels of attempts to subvert our democracy."

Home Affairs Minister and Liberal Party powerbroker Peter Dutton also backed his junior right-wing factional colleague. "Andrew is privy to a lot of information and intelligence briefings others aren't... foreign interference in our country is at an all-time high... I can tell you our agencies, including ASIO and the Australian Federal Police, are working on matters all the time," he said.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg used a dinner at the American-Australian Leadership Dialogue in Perth last Friday to pledge allegiance to the US alliance. "It's more important than ever that our two great nations, the United States and Australia, work more closely than ever... across the economic, the strategic and the political realms."

Newly elected Liberal member of parliament David Sharma, the former ambassador to Israel, endorsed the comparison of contemporary China with the Nazi regime.

"Hastie is right to ring the bell on this issue, and to warn that our greatest vulnerability is our thinking," he tweeted. "In World War II, we failed to realise early enough that German ambitions could not be accommodated. The point

is, rising powers inevitably cause convulsions within the international system, and China's rise is no different...

"[I]f the rising power is revisionist in nature, and cannot be accommodated within the existing order—because it fundamentally does not accept the legitimacy of that order—then the future becomes much tougher.... as Hastie argues... the ideological direction and ambition of China has become far more pronounced.... Our strategy and thinking needs to reflect this shift."

Sharma's comments were only the starkest in implying that a military confrontation is inevitable if Beijing does not bow down to US dominance over the Asian region.

In the media, senior *Australian* columnist Peter Van Onselen endorsed the comments of Hastie, Dutton and Sharma in a piece headlined "No escaping China's dark truth." He wrote that they "understand the security threat the rise of an expansionist totalitarian power with the world's largest population is."

Peter Hartcher, the international editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* who has been at the forefront of demonising "Chinese influence" in Australia, praised Hastie's assessment that "China is a present threat to Australian sovereignty and liberty," adding "his realisation is widely shared across both of Australia's major parties."

Michelle Grattan, a veteran political commentator, also backed Hastie in an opinion contribution to the *Conversation* website and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "Hastie could have drawn another parallel—with the failure of countries in the 1930s to fully appreciate the looming threat from Japan," she wrote.

Rory Medcalf, a former diplomat, intelligence operative and prominent pro-US strategic analyst, contributed to the *Australian Financial Review* a column headlined "In defence of Andrew Hastie."

He wrote: "[A]n Australian politician would hardly be the first person to note that some of the Chinese Communist Party's objectives and methods today resonate with the totalitarian and imperialist powers of the past. Strategic analysts have long warned of parallels between China and certain danger signs of imperial Japan."

Medcalf concluded: "[W]e can no longer pretend we are dealing with a normal country in normal times. None of this is to say that things are right with America too, though at least Washington is waking to the China challenge."

Taken together, this range of commentary point to fundamental features of Australian politics.

Firstly, figures like Hastie serve as a mouthpiece for the Australian intelligence agencies and military, which are completely integrated with their US counterparts and are hostile to any questioning of the country's unconditional alignment with Washington.

The pro-US stance of the intelligence-military apparatus is shared, to one degree or another, by the overwhelming majority of members of parliament, media editors and journalists, academics and analysts. Despite the massive economic ramifications of any breakdown in Australia-China relations, the dominant faction of the Australian ruling elite considers their own predatory strategic and corporate interests in the Asia-Pacific and internationally to be entwined with the preservation of US global hegemony.

The hysteria over the Chinese "threat" is to create a climate in which issues that were raised by the Trump administration at the AUSMIN talks can be pushed forward. These include the prospect of stationing short- to medium-range US missile systems on Australian territory; the possible expansion of US air and naval basing arrangements and Australian involvement in provocative US actions such as incursions into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea; and a naval blockade of Iran in the Persian Gulf.

The Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison has already announced this week a multi-billion-dollar plan to boost the capacities of Australian special forces so they can deploy anywhere in the Asian region within as little as 24 hours.

Within Australia, the ruling elite requires its ever-closer incorporation into US war planning and preparations to be accompanied by slandering any public opposition as being the product of Chinese "influence," and for organisations and individuals to be subject to prosecution under the foreign interference laws.

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