

Australia joins US naval operation against Iran, foreshadows involvement in South China Sea

By James Cogan
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It has taken less than three weeks for the Australian political establishment to fall into line with “requests” made by the Trump administration during the Australia-US ministerial (AUSMIN) talks held in Sydney from August 3–4.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper publicly asked Australia to contribute to the US-led force in the Straits of Hormuz, the key maritime passage from the Persian Gulf. The purpose of the operation is to threaten Iran with a naval blockade of what remains of its oil and gas exports, which have plummeted due to American-imposed sanctions. It is one component of a broader military build-up by the US and its allies to attempt to overthrow the Iranian government and install a pro-imperialist regime.

On August 21, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that an Australian Navy frigate, P-8 surveillance aircraft and ground support personnel will join the US preparations for another bloodbath in the Middle East. The P-8 will deploy next month, while the frigate will go on operations from January. Although relatively small, the Australian contingent is intended to bolster US efforts to drum up a token “coalition,” operating without UN approval.

The Labor Party opposition immediately supported the decision. Acting Labor leader and defence spokesperson Richard Marles declared: “Australia has an interest in freedom of navigation... this [the Persian Gulf] is a piece of international architecture which is as essential to our national interests as any.”

Australia’s involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq likewise began with naval operations to uphold “freedom of navigation” and enforce sanctions. On the fabricated pretext that Iraq had “weapons of mass destruction,” Canberra dispatched Army special forces and Air Force

FA-18 fighter-bombers. Australian Special Air Service (SAS) units are believed to have been the first “coalition of the willing” troops to enter Iraqi territory, in flagrant violation of international law.

Sixteen years on, US imperialism has plans for even more catastrophic crimes—against both Iran and China. Pompeo declared during the AUSMIN talks that the “time is right” for Australia and the US to “band together” because the “challenge China presents to us in the region is upon us, whether that is the militarisation of the South China Sea or their Belt and Road Initiative.”

This was a thinly-veiled demand that Australia participate in US “freedom of navigation” military operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. Since October 2015, American warships and aircraft have provocatively violated Chinese territorial claims to small islets and reefs, daring the Chinese military to attempt to stop them.

Australian forces have not yet taken part in FONOPs in Chinese-claimed waters or airspace, despite escalating US pressure, due to its fear of Beijing’s reaction. China is Australia’s largest export market and has signalled that it will retaliate economically to open military provocations by Canberra. In December 2017, for example, a comment in the English-language *Global Times* said Australian operations in the South China Sea “may prompt China to adopt strong countermeasures which will seriously impact Australian economic development.”

At the AUSMIN talks, Pompeo spelt out the indifference of the American ruling class for the profit concerns of those sections of Australian big business, such as the mining and education sectors, that do the bulk of trade with China. He answered a statement by Australian journalist Tom Switzer that “Canberra would be unwise to support Washington in a confrontation with

China that America probably cannot win,” with the dismissive reply: “Look, you can sell your soul for a pile [of] soya beans or you can protect your people.”

The subsequent exchange between Switzer and Pompeo was even more significant. Switzer asked: “Does Washington still believe unequivocally that the ANZUS alliance obliges Canberra to America’s side in the event of a conflict?” Pompeo answered: “Yeah, the ANZUS alliance is unambiguous.”

During a press conference, the US secretary of state pointedly reminded the Australian establishment of why it has backed Washington in neo-colonial wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, and the intensifying geo-strategic, military and economic conflict with China.

“The United States invests nearly \$170 billion in Australia each and every year,” Pompeo asserted. “The United States is by far the largest investor here in Australia, accounting for more than 25 percent of all foreign direct investment.” He could have added that the Australian capitalist class concentrates much of its foreign investment in the United States—an estimated \$719 billion at the end of 2018. By contrast, Australian investment in China has been falling and stood at \$75 billion.

Yesterday, Morrison used a state visit to Vietnam to reassure Washington that the country will remain aligned with the US, regardless of the consequences. In a speech in Hanoi, Morrison used all the propaganda code words employed by the US to justify its military build-up against China. Australia, he asserted, would uphold an “Indo-Pacific where we respect each other’s sovereignty and independence, because if we allow the sovereignty or independence of any of our neighbours to suffer coercion, then we are all diminished.”

The hypocrisy of such an allegation, being made by an American ally that sent troops to the murderous US-led war to crush Vietnam’s fight for independence, and took part in the illegal invasion of Iraq, was disregarded by the audience of Australian and Vietnamese business heads and politicians.

The country accused of violating other countries’ “sovereignty” is China, which recently sent an oil survey vessel into the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, which is claimed by both Beijing and Hanoi.

The Trump administration has latched onto the China-Vietnam dispute to denounce Beijing for undermining “regional peace and security.” The US State Department, in another case of glaring hypocrisy,

condemned China yesterday for not recognising Vietnam’s claims in the Spratly Islands under the “1982 Law of the Sea Convention” (UNCLOS). The United States refuses to even recognise UNCLOS, while Australia violated its terms and laid claim to most of the resources in the Timor Sea, against the tiny statelet of East Timor.

According to reports yesterday in the *Nikkei Asian Review*, the US and South East Asian countries, including Vietnam, will conduct a joint naval exercise starting September 2 in the Gulf of Thailand. The USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier battlegroup is already operating in the vicinity of the South China Sea.

Pro-US commentators lauded Morrison’s statements in Vietnam as an indication that Australian forces could soon join military operations in the South China Sea, supposedly in support of Vietnam.

Australian Strategic Policy Institute executive director Peter Jennings said: “What’s needed in the South China Sea is lots of states that aren’t China exercising freedom of navigation, working together, doing training, the whole gamut of things defence forces do at sea and under and over the sea.”

Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the *Australian*, wrote today: “Vietnam’s ambassador to Canberra, Ngo Huong Nam, made sure none of us missed the point when he called for Canberra’s support for Hanoi in its dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea.”

The discussion on the South China Sea is unfolding in the context of a broader frenzy in Australia over the alleged Chinese “threat” and the release of a report by the US Studies Centre calling for unconditional alignment with Washington against Beijing.

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