

Australian government unveils military boost aimed against China

By Mike Head
1 July 2020

Amid the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Scott Morrison today announced an aggressive military expansion, marking a more explicit shift to supporting the escalating US confrontation with China.

Over the next decade, \$575 billion will be spent on the military, including an expanded \$270 billion military hardware buildup, featuring “new long-range strike capabilities.”

This will start with the immediate purchase of US missiles capable of striking Chinese vessels and facilities in southeast Asia, and which could be reconfigured to hit southern China itself.

The announcement was made in the language of preparing the population for war. Asked on Seven TV’s “Today” show this morning if the “staggering” new amount of \$270 billion meant China is “that great a threat,” Morrison answered in the affirmative.

“The big competition between China and the United States means tensions are much higher,” he said. “I mean, we haven’t seen a time of instability coming out of COVID-19 like this since the 1930s and early 1940s... And all of our defence force and defence strategy is built on the alliance, also as a foundation, with the United States.”

The 1930s and 1940s refer of course to the Great Depression and World War II.

Later, addressing military cadets, Morrison said Australia must “prepare for a post-COVID world that is poorer, more dangerous and more disorderly.” He emphasised: “Relations between China and the United States are fractious as they compete for political, economic and technological supremacy.”

Morrison said war could erupt suddenly. The Indo-Pacific was the “epicentre” of rising strategic competition and “the risk of miscalculation—and even conflict—is heightening.”

As well as intensifying the US-China conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a worldwide economic breakdown, thrown the Australian economy into its deepest contraction since the 1930s with government debt spiralling toward \$1 trillion.

Yet, while millions of working people are suffering mass unemployment and vast social distress, hundreds of billions of dollars more are to be poured into the armed forces. Morrison boasted of exceeding the government’s previous promise of increasing annual military spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product.

In 2016, the Liberal-National government pledged to spend \$195 billion over a decade to buy new warships, submarines, missiles and other weapons systems. Now that has been increased to \$270 billion.

Morrison said Australia would remain prepared to join “US-led coalitions” globally, as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq, as provided for in the 2016 defence white paper. But the military’s geographical focus would now be the region ranging from the northeast Indian Ocean, through “maritime and mainland southeast Asia” to the southwest Pacific.

While this shift is couched in defensive terms of holding away “adversaries,” the build-up consists of offensive weaponry acquired from the US designed to help cut off Chinese access to vital shipping lanes through southeast Asia and block Chinese attempts to strike back if attacked by the US.

As a starting point, the Trump administration has already approved the \$800 million sale of 200 AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles to Australia. These will be configured to travel up to 370 kilometres but can fly as far as 1,000 kilometres. Deployed on war planes, these missiles could strike targets in the South China Sea or southern China.

An estimated \$10 billion-\$17 billion is to be spent on fighter aircraft, signalling the possible expansion of the

US Joint Strike Fighter acquisition program, and \$5 billion for an “expanded long-range air launched strike capability.”

Between \$6.2 billion and \$9.3 billion will be spent on developing “high-speed long-range strike, including hypersonic weapons,” as well as \$400 million-\$500 million in joint US-Australian maritime strike missiles, capable of low-level flight. Also being considered are “additional, longer-range weapon systems.”

Between \$168 billion and \$183 billion will be spent on upgrades to the Navy and Army and \$5 billion-\$7 billion on “undersea surveillance systems including hi-tech sensors.” Also planned is a \$75 billion expansion to maritime forces to “provide greater capability for anti-submarine warfare, sealift, border security, maritime patrol, aerial warfare, area denial and undersea warfare.”

Another \$70 billion is to be spent on “increased combat power” for army and land-based forces, drone vehicles and long-range rocket artillery.

Space and cyber warfare is being prepared as well. The plan features “sovereign”-owned military satellites with “ground-based signals intelligence facilities.” Some \$7 billion will go toward improving the military’s capabilities in space, and \$15 billion will boost “cyber and information warfare” weaponry, \$1.3 billion of which will expand the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) and the Australian Cyber Security Centre.

While also presented as a defensive move to combat cyber attacks, the cyber warfare plan marks a further development of the offensive capacity of the country’s military and intelligence agencies and their US partners to attack targeted countries, such as China, by hacking into or destroying computer-operated facilities.

As far back as 2013, top US intelligence officials announced that Washington was setting up scores of military units to wage offensive cyber war—i.e., to write malicious computer code to disable or destroy computers and computer-controlled infrastructure.

Following suit, the 2016 Australian Defence White Paper announced a 10-year workforce expansion of 1,700 jobs in intelligence and cyber security. This included a 900-person joint cyber unit in the Australian Defence Force, announced in 2017.

The largest component in the latest cyber war package, first unveiled by Morrison yesterday, is \$470 million allocated for expanding by 500 the personnel of the ASD. This is the country’s electronic eavesdropping agency, which collaborates closely with the US National Security Agency (NSA) and other members of the global “Five

Eyes” spy network.

As the thousands of secret US documents published by NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden and by Julian Assange via WikiLeaks showed, the Five Eyes partners intercept the communications of millions of people around the globe, exchange data about each others’ citizens, and supply cyber warfare facilities and targeting information to their militaries.

As the ASD’s expansion demonstrates, the drive toward war is being accompanied by preparations to spy on and crack down on political dissent, including anti-war sentiment, and the deepening working class discontent produced by the ruling elite’s exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis to attack jobs and working conditions.

Morrison’s two announcements in two days of major warfare expansions are transparently timed to feed into an escalating anti-China witch hunt, intended to poison public opinion, divert from the social crisis and prepare for potentially catastrophic military conflict.

Only two weeks ago, Morrison claimed that Australia was under attack by a “state-based cyber actor,” an unsubstantiated allegation clearly directed against China. Last Friday, his government authorised police raids on the home and parliamentary office of a state Labor Party MP, Shaoquett Moselmane, who was sensationally branded by the corporate media as a pro-China “foreign agent” and “the enemy within.”

The government has the support of the opposition Labor Party, which is equally committed to the US military alliance and has backed every move over the past two decades to strengthen the powers of the military and intelligence apparatus. In fact, it was the Gillard Labor government that emphatically aligned behind the US “pivot” to militarily confront China in 2011, agreeing to the stationing of US marines in Darwin and greater US access to northern Australian military bases.

At a media conference today, opposition leader Anthony Albanese stated his agreement with Morrison’s announcement, saying it was in line with Labor’s call “for a long time, to prioritise our regional security.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>