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Australian prime minister lines up with Trump at the G20

Amid the rising geo-political tensions on display at last weekend's G20 meeting in Tokyo, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison sought to manoeuvre between the United States, Australia's longstanding ally, and China, its largest trading partner. Trump, however, made clear that he expected Morrison and the Australian government to line up with the US in its confrontations on all fronts—in particular against Iran and China.

Prior to his departure last week, Morrison gave a keynote speech on foreign policy in which he declared that he would work for a resolution to the trade and economic war between the US and China. "We should not just sit back and passively await our fate in the wake of a major power contest," he declared, signalling that he would seek the support of other powers to protect the world trading system.

The G20 summit, however, quickly revealed Australia's heavy dependence on the United States. On Thursday evening, just prior to its opening, Trump organized a high-powered dinner with Morrison to in effect lay down the law. The US President was accompanied by top administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and national security adviser John Bolton, as well as anti-China hawks such as trade representative Robert Lighthizer and trade adviser Peter Navarro—a line-up that was clearly aimed at both impressing and intimidating.

The dinner was the only one of its type organised by Trump at the G20 and appears to have been organised at the last minute. It underscored the importance that the US attaches to its alliance with Australia under conditions where the US is increasingly at odds with

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more powerful allies such as Japan and Germany. Trump lauded the US-Australian alliance as “one of our best”—not only are the Australian and US militaries closely integrated, but Washington has relied on Canberra’s political support for its criminal policies, including the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is clear that Morrison’s much touted appeals for the US to end its economic war on China received short shrift. The Australian prime minister pressed his case pointing to the potential economic damage if the US-China trade conflict was not resolved. Trump made clear that his preoccupation was that the “inherited trade imbalances” had to be addressed, and claimed US allies had also benefited economically from his policies. While Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to restart trade talks, the US president will undoubtedly make sure any deal secures US interests, even at the expense of allies.

However, Trump’s chief purpose in holding the dinner was to ensure that the Morrison government was on song with the US war drive against Iran. US Secretary of State Pompeo told the *Australian* last Thursday that “Australia is an important player here... they, like many nations, suffer from the fact the world’s largest state sponsor of terror continues down the path of building its missile program in a way that threatens not only the Middle East but the entire world.”

Pompeo called on Australia to take a more aggressive stand against Iran and to impose additional sanctions unilaterally. He also appealed for Australia to send military forces to join the US in the Persian Gulf, under the guise of defending commercial shipping through the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Australia would be “of great assistance” to US efforts to “build a coalition that will keep those waterways open,” he declared. Australian support is particularly needed as major European powers such as Germany are hostile to Trump’s abrogation of the 2015 deal which has undermined their interests in Iran.

In reality, the acute danger of war in the Persian Gulf is entirely of the Trump administration’s making. Trump tore up the 2015 agreement reached between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany that imposed stringent limits on Iran’s nuclear program in return for an easing of sanctions. The US has re-imposed crippling sanctions on Iran and at the same time has drastically expanded its military presence in the region. Last month, Trump came within 10 minutes of launching military strikes on Iran that would have triggered a devastating war, before calling it off.

Morrison signalled his support for the Trump administration’s reckless policies, declaring that he and Trump had a “shared understanding” on the limitations of the 2015 deal with

Iran. While not immediately committing Australian armed forces to the Persian Gulf, he nevertheless declared that his government “would deal with any request from an ally such as the United States seriously and on its merits.” He added: “It’s not unheard of to have Australian frigates in that part of the world engaged in maritime operations,” noting only that the current situation would require a “different analysis.”

The Trump administration is also relying on Australia to play a greater role in the South Pacific along with New Zealand in undermining Chinese influence among the region’s small island states. In outspoken comments this week, the newly appointed US ambassador to Australia, Arthur Culvahouse, has called on Canberra to play “a great power leadership role” in the Pacific, saying he expected Morrison to increasingly call out “malign influences”—a barely veiled reference to China.

Culvahouse hailed Morrison’s “Pacific step up”—an aggressive intervention in the Pacific—saying that the US had “immense confidence” in Australia’s standing in the region, with “expertise and relationships and sensitivities that exceed ours”. He added that the US was not abdicating its role, but was going to be paying “particular attention to the Australian leadership role” in the region.

The American ambassador lauded the military alliance with Australia, but also pointedly underscored Australia’s economic dependence on the US. After noting that China was Australia’s largest trading partner, he noted that it was heavily dependent on US investment with “20 percent of the capital that is raised by Australian companies” being from the US. Coming from the Trump administration, the remark amounts to an implied threat—such financial resources could dry up if Australia does not meet Washington’s demands.

In his support for Trump’s war drive with Iran, Morrison is putting Australia on the front line of a conflict that could not only engulf the Middle East but drag in other major powers. In lining up with the US against China in the Pacific and beyond, he threatens, not only to provoke Chinese economic retaliation, but to embroil the Australian population in an even more dangerous war between nuclear armed powers.

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