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Australian prime minister expands war commitments during Washington trip

From start to finish, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's three-day visit to Washington, which ended on Saturday, was dominated by the Trump administration's preparations for war against North Korea and, ultimately, China.

Behind all the smiles, platitudes and mutual back-slapping between President Donald Trump and Turnbull, the prime minister was clearly under intense pressure to intensify Australia's participation in US military operations, and to align the country economically more closely to the US.

Turnbull's trip, and his obsequious praises for Trump, came just a month after the unveiling of a new US [National Defense Strategy](#), that signals direct military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia and China. The document accuses China of seeking "Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global pre-eminence in the future."

This looming conflict has enormous implications for the Australian corporate and financial elite, which depends heavily on China, by far its largest export market, but relies overwhelmingly on the US for military and geo-strategic support, as well as on American corporate finance and investment.

The pressure on Turnbull was all the greater because his precarious Liberal-National Coalition government, torn by factional rifts, shows signs of unraveling. On the very eve

of his arrival, it was further destabilized by the [forced removal](#) of Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce.

Turnbull set the tone by beginning his trip at the Arlington national war cemetery. Accompanied by the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, he paid tribute to “America’s war dead,” declaring they had “paid the supreme sacrifice” for American and Australian “freedom.” Turnbull insisted that this was a reminder of the 100 years of military “mateship,” dating back to a World War I battle in France, between the two countries. This partnership would continue, he assured his audience, for another 100 years.

On day one, Turnbull also received briefings from US security and economic chiefs, including National Intelligence Director Dan Coats, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, underscoring the intimate intelligence, military and economic ties enjoyed by Canberra and Washington.

At a joint media conference on the second day, both Trump and Turnbull described the US Australia alliance as closer than ever. “It’s been incredible and it’s only getting better,” Trump intoned. Turnbull added that the US was Australia’s “most important strategic and economic partner” and the alliance “is as close as it possibly could be and yet keeps getting closer.”

Trump used the media conference to [menace](#) North Korea with crippling economic sanctions and a military onslaught. Turnbull not only welcomed Trump’s threats. He committed his government to deploy naval ships to enforce the sanctions by intercepting vessels allegedly carrying North Korean cargo, thus placing Australia on the front line of any conflict. He also pledged to “do everything we can to tighten the vice of those sanctions.”

Trump declared publicly that he wanted Australia to join the US in conducting provocative “freedom of navigation” operations, aimed at challenging Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. “We would love to have Australia involved and I think Australia wants us to stay involved,” he declared. Trump’s call followed an announcement by the May government that Britain would undertake such an exercise.

While Turnbull declined, for now, to “speculate” on such operations, against which Beijing has sharply warned, today’s *Australian* confirmed that military plans for similar exercises are being considered. “The Turnbull government faces a difficult decision,” the newspaper’s editorial emphasised.

Trump also identified China as a threat to US capitalism. He pointed out that, while he had “developed a great relationship” with China, “they’ve been killing us on trade for the last long period of time—killing us, absolutely killing the United States on trade.”

In their closed-door talks, Turnbull and Trump struck several agreements directly related to the US-China conflict. Both leaders referenced “a lot of deals” made during their meeting, with Trump saying Australia had agreed to purchase additional military equipment. Australian purchases of US weaponry already total \$10 billion every four years.

This commitment has not passed unnoticed in China. In its otherwise muted report on Turnbull’s trip, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua noted a White House statement citing Australia as being among the top 10 purchasers of US-sourced defence equipment.

Another agreement sealed between the two countries was to foster infrastructure investment between them and across the Indo-Pacific region. Its specific purpose is an attempt to counter China’s ambitious “One Belt One Road” plan to develop transport and infrastructure projects throughout the region, which would link China directly to the major European powers. According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the infrastructure initiative would also involve Japan and India, as “quadrilateral security partners” with Australia and the US against China.

A further pact, according to a White House press release, was made to collaborate in “strategic” mineral projects, particularly related to “rare earths,” which are critical for technology and military purposes. Over the past year, US media reports have complained of China’s alleged dominance in rare earth elements.

Trump and Turnbull also discussed further unspecified “cooperation” in the US-led interventions in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, where the danger of war with Iran and Russia is growing.

On day three, addressing a US state governors’ convention, Turnbull directly linked calls for closer economic ties to military calculations. Suggesting that Washington should reconsider Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) economic bloc, he noted that the new US Ambassador to Australia, Admiral Harry Harris had “said the TPP was as valuable as another aircraft carrier group.”

Turnbull hailed Harris’s appointment as a “message” that the US “national defence strategy signals a reinvestment in American hard power and the alliance system which amplifies its reach.”

Harris, a notorious anti-China hawk, who recently called publicly for war preparations against China, is being sent to Australia to quash any dissent within ruling circles over the prospect of war with their largest customer, and to insist on the suppression of anti-war opposition among workers and youth.

Turnbull linked the TPP to the infrastructure pact, saying: “What is lacking is the legal framework whereby or wherein that capital can be safely invested.” The TPP was essential to “setting the rules of the road” in trade and investment, he remarked.

Trump, however, stood by his dumping of the TPP, in line with his “America First” platform—the pursuit of US capitalism’s unilateral interests, including against erstwhile allies. Despite intensive lobbying by Turnbull, Trump also refused to give him any guarantee that Australian corporations would be exempted from punishing tariffs on steel and aluminium imports, which are under consideration by the White House. These responses contain thinly veiled threats of economic consequences if the Australian ruling class were to waver in its unconditional military alliance with the US.

In a desperate effort to woo US powerbrokers, Turnbull brought with him the largest-ever delegation of Australian business and political leaders, including 22 CEOs and five state or territory leaders. Among them were Commonwealth Bank chief Ian Narev, Seven West Media chairman Kerry Stokes, Visy chief Anthony Pratt, Rio Tinto boss Jean- Sebastian Jacques, Wesfarmers chairman Michael Chaney, Qantas chairman Leigh Clifford and Fortescue mining founder Andrew Forrest.

Turnbull’s address to the National Governors’ Association declared that “peace and prosperity” in the Indo-Pacific depended on “the sheet-anchor of American commitment and strategic power.” He pledged: “American commitment has come at a cost—paid in blood and treasure—and we understand that the American people expect others to pull their weight. As we do, and always have.”

The Australian prime minister’s visit amounted to an unconditional vow of support for US war plans, with incalculable consequences for the Australian population. And he rounded off his trip by inviting Trump to Australia. Despite the US president’s effusive acceptance of the offer, however, his implied threats of retaliation remain, in the event of any deviation by Turnbull or any future Australian government.