

Morrison looking at details for commitment to protect shipping

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Scott Morrison has flagged the government is working with the United States and Britain on details for an Australian role in helping safeguard shipping passages in the Middle East.

Morrison told a news conference in Townsville on Thursday he had spoken to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday night and “indicated to him that we were looking very carefully at our participation in this initiative”.

Morrison stressed it would be a multinational operation.

This is not a unilateral initiative by any one country, and it is about safe shipping lanes, it is about deescalating tensions and making sure that the current situation does not worsen.

He said the government had not “made any decisions on this yet. We want to be fully satisfied about the operational arrangements that are in place”. It was very early days and it would be a while before things came together.

Read more: [Iran and US refusing to budge as tit-for-tat ship seizures in Middle East raise the temperature](#)

In practice though, the government has obviously agreed in principle, subject to satisfactory arrangements being worked out. Its role is somewhat complicated, however, by the fact it does not have a ship in the region.

The US’s request for Australian assistance was discussed at the weekend AUSMIN talks.

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Morrison said there were other countries which were in a similar position to Australia - “engaging before making any full decisions”.

He stressed the maritime issue “should be clearly divorced from the broader issues that relate to Iran and the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the nuclear deal that the US pulled out of last year].

“That’s a separate issue. This is about safe shipping lanes and ensuring that we can restore at least some stability to what is a very unstable part of the world at the moment,” Morrison said.

“There has been a very disturbing series of events that we’ve seen in the Straits of Hormuz, and freedom of navigation and safe shipping lanes is very important to the global economy and that is a matter that is as important in that part of the world as it is in many other parts of the world.”

China hits back at Liberal chair of security committee

The Chinese authorities have accused Liberal MP Andrew Hastie of “Cold-War mentality and ideological bias”, after he drew on the example of France’s “catastrophic” failure to comprehend the threat of a rising Nazi Germany in an article warning about the dangers from a rising China.

Hastie, chair of the powerful parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security, [wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald](#)

:

The West once believed that economic liberalisation would naturally lead to democratisation in China. This was our Maginot Line. It would keep us safe, just as the French believed their series of steel and concrete forts would guard them against the German advance in 1940. But their thinking failed catastrophically. The French had failed to appreciate the evolution of mobile warfare. Like the French, Australia has failed to see how mobile our authoritarian neighbour has become.

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Even worse, we ignore the role that ideology plays in China's actions across the Indo-Pacific region. We keep using our own categories to understand its actions, such as its motivations for building ports and roads, rather than those used by the Chinese Communist Party.

The West has made this mistake before. Commentators once believed Stalin's decisions were the rational actions of a realist great power.

Hastie referred to action Australia had taken such as foreign espionage legislation and more closely monitoring infrastructure.

But "right now our greatest vulnerability lies not in our infrastructure, but in our thinking. That intellectual failure makes us institutionally weak. If we don't understand the challenge ahead for our civil society, in our parliaments, in our universities, in our private enterprises, in our charities — our little platoons — then choices will be made for us. Our sovereignty, our freedoms, will be diminished."

Read more: [*Australia depends less on Chinese trade than some might think*](#)

A spokesperson for the Chinese embassy said in a statement:

We strongly deplore the Australian federal MP Andrew Hastie's rhetoric on "China threat" which lays bare his Cold-War mentality and ideological bias. It goes against the world trend of peace, cooperation and development. It is detrimental to China-Australian relations.

History has proven and will continue to prove that China's peaceful development is an opportunity, not a threat to the world.

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We urge certain Australian politicians to take off their “colored lens” and view China’s development path in an objective and rational way. They should make efforts to promote mutual trust between China and Australia, instead of doing the opposite.

Morrison played down the Hastie comments, noting he was a backbencher not a minister.

We will continue to work to have a cooperative arrangement with China. Of course, there is much to be gained from that relationship, particularly from the trade side, but let’s not forget that relationship is far broader than just the economic one.

But equally, our relationship with the United States is a very special one indeed and there is a deep connection on values and that’s of no surprise to anyone.

So we believe we can continue to manage these relationships together, but I don’t think anyone is in any way unaware of the challenges that present there.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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