

Australian Labor Party leader outlines militarist foreign policy

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Labor Party leader Bill Shorten used a speech on Monday at the Lowy Institute, a corporate think tank, to outline an aggressive foreign policy aimed at expanding Australian imperialism's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

With a federal election due to be held before May, the address was a clear signal to the Australian military-intelligence apparatus, and to Washington, that a Labor government would intensify Australia's alignment with US-led preparations for conflict with China, while extending Australia's own predatory operations in the region.

Shorten said the "international order," established on the basis of US economic and military superiority after World War II, was "being disrupted." He specifically referenced China's growing influence and the Trump administration's "America First" program, characterised by a turn to trade war, which is leading to economic and military tensions with foes and nominal allies alike.

Shorten's remarks formed part of a broader discussion within the Australian corporate and political establishment over the implications of Trump's reckless, and often erratic, foreign policy. Sections of the ruling elite are deeply fearful that the US economic measures and military provocations against Beijing threaten their lucrative business relations with China.

Shorten declared that his government would be prepared to differ with Trump, but this would be done "within the enduring framework of our close relationship" with the US. The Labor leader declared that Australians would be "more responsible allies" of Washington by voicing these concerns.

Shorten is in line with the dominant section of the political establishment which is wholly committed to the US alliance that has been the cornerstone of

Australian foreign policy for over 70 years. At the same time, he said Australia needed to adopt a more "independent, confident and ambitious" stance.

Significantly, Shorten's response to concerns over the implications of Trump's foreign policy is to expand Australian military influence throughout the Indo-Pacific, including through a build-up of the armed forces.

This, Shorten indicated, would be aimed at propping up the US-led "global order." This "order" has enabled Washington, and its allies, including Australia, to pursue their predatory imperialist ambitions.

Shorten declared that Labor has a "firm commitment to a strong, self-reliant, defence force." A Labor government would maintain high levels of military spending, currently at 2 percent of gross domestic product, and expand the defence industry, so that it "has the ability to project Australian power, to have Australia be taken seriously."

A central focus of these efforts would be the Pacific, which Shorten called the "Blue continent." Shorten only hinted at the geo-political implications of that term. Numerous figures in the US and Australian military-intelligence establishments have insisted that control of the region is decisive in the US-led confrontation with China.

The Lowy Institute, where Shorten spoke, has been at the forefront of a campaign for a more aggressive US-Australian stance in the Pacific. Last August, it published a report warning that China was set to overtake Australia as the largest donor to Pacific countries, after Beijing committed four times more in the region than Canberra during 2017.

In April, the think tank issued a paper titled "Safeguarding Australia's security interests through closer Pacific ties," based on a 12-month "South

Pacific Fragile States Project” headed by Lieutenant Colonel Greg Colton, an Australian army officer. It called for Australia to focus on drafting a “Biketawa Plus Declaration” with Pacific island governments that would “seek to limit the military involvement in the region of those external actors not signatories to the agreement,” especially China and Russia.

The Labor leader condemned Australia’s current Liberal-National government for relegating the Pacific Affairs portfolio to the status of an assistant ministry. He also criticised Prime Minister Scott Morrison for failing to attend September’s Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru.

Shorten claimed that Labor’s policy would not seek “the strategic denial of others,” i.e. China, to the Pacific. Yet this was precisely the purpose of what Shorten outlined. “We’re not going to forfeit the Pacific because we didn’t turn up,” he declared.

Shorten said a Labor government would encourage Australian companies “to invest in projects that drive development in the region: from roads and ports to water supply, communications technology and energy infrastructure.” He touted similar measures by allies, including the US, Japan and New Zealand.

Shorten said Labor would establish an “infrastructure investment bank” to provide loans for “nation-building projects” in the region. This would make Australia the “partner-of-choice” for Pacific countries.

In other words, Shorten called for a direct contest with China for influence in the region. He also advocated an expanded Australian military presence in the Pacific, including through closer ties with the armed forces of Tonga, Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

It is necessary to “mend the relationship” with the Fijian armed forces and “ensure the Australian Defence Force is best-placed to develop the Fiji military’s professional capabilities to ensure Fiji’s security needs.” Australian and US strategic circles, have, in recent years, voiced major concerns over Fiji’s economic and military ties with China and Russia.

Shorten’s comments were a declaration that Labor would intensify Australia’s decades-long operations throughout the Pacific, which the ruling elite views as its “own backyard.” Labor has supported, or directly overseen, military interventions throughout the region, including the 1999 deployment of troops to East Timor, and the protracted police-military occupation of

Solomon Islands that began in 2003.

Significantly, in the question and answer period after his speech, Shorten denounced Beijing’s alleged oppression of the Uighur people in western China. This was amid a hysterical US-led campaign accusing the Chinese regime of holding hundreds of thousands of people in internment camps.

The media frenzy, fed by unsubstantiated reports from think tanks with close ties to the US and Australian military-intelligence apparatus, is attempting to foment anti-Chinese sentiment and promote separatist tendencies within China to weaken the Beijing regime.

Shorten’s speech sent the message that Labor will continue its role as one of the chief props of US aggression. Shorten was a senior minister in the former Labor government of Julia Gillard as it aligned Australia, in 2011, with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which featured a vast military build-up in Asia in preparation for war with China.

Since then, key Labor leaders have advocated Australian participation in US military provocations against Beijing in the South China Sea, and Labor supported the passage of sweeping “foreign interference” laws in June, essentially aimed at demonising China and criminalising anti-war opposition.

At the conclusion of his speech, Shorten warned of the “echoes” between today and the period before World War II. He spoke of the growth of “protectionism,” the emergence of “ultra-nationalist governments” and the collapse of international institutions, including the League of Nations, all of which led to “damaging conflict.”

While he bemoaned the dangers, the program Shorten outlined only heightens the risk of a catastrophic conflict between nuclear-armed powers, in which Australia would play a frontline role for the US.



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