

Australian defence minister speaks of war with China

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In extraordinary comments on national television yesterday morning, Australia's newly-installed Defence Minister Peter Dutton declared that the prospect of a near-term war with China over control of Taiwan should not be "discounted."

Dutton's statement formed part of a broader discussion within the Australian political and media establishment, which is openly canvassing participation in a catastrophic war in the Indo-Pacific.

The themes of "military preparedness," "regional threats" and the glorification of recent army campaigns were prominent in yesterday's commemorations of Anzac Day. The nationalist holiday, which "celebrates" the disastrous landing of Australian and New Zealand troops in Turkey in 1915 during World War I, is a focal point of the promotion of militarism.

Dutton made the comments in an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Insiders" program. His exchange with one of the program's hosts, David Speers, demonstrated the extent to which the official media, including its nominally "liberal" wing, is actively campaigning for stepped-up Australian military activities in the region.

Speers repeatedly asserted that Beijing was responsible for growing tensions, declaring that "we've seen a lot of aggression from China." The thrust of his questions was to demand to know how Australia was prepared to counter this "threat."

Speers uncritically cited recent statements by former Liberal-National Defence Minister Christopher Pyne and past Prime Minister Tony Abbott, forecasting a war with China.

Pyne, who has worked as a lobbyist for weapons manufacturers since leaving parliament, told a University of Adelaide gathering earlier this month that there was a greater chance of "kinetic war" in the Indo-Pacific today than when he was in office two years ago.

Declaring that Taiwan was the most likely flashpoint, Pyne chillingly stated that he was speaking of "not a cyber war,

but a real one involving loss of life, destruction of military platforms, with aggressors and defenders on different sides. This isn't rhetoric, this is something that you and I may well have to confront in the next 5 to 10 years."

Abbott, during a speech in New Zealand last week which was prominently published in the *Australian*, canvassed whether "China [is] likely to try to retake Taiwan by force; in that event, what should fellow democracies do; and, perhaps the hardest one, the extent to which countries such as ours have it in us any more to make big sacrifices in a good cause."

Abbott's conclusion was "that a battle for Taiwan could start quite soon." He cited recent statements by US military commanders to that effect, noting: "The latest Australian defence update has dropped the longstanding assumption of a '10-year strategic warning time' for major conventional war."

Asked by Speers if there would be such a "battle for Taiwan," Dutton replied: "I don't think it should be discounted... China has been very clear about the reunification and that's been a long-held objective of theirs. They have been very clear about that goal. People need to be realistic about the activity. There is militarisation of bases across the region."

While the defence force hoped for peace, Dutton said, there was a "high level of preparedness... for our Australian defence force to meet the threats that we see in our region toward our country, against our allies."

The presentation of the mounting tensions turns reality on its head. For the past decade the US, under the Obama and Trump administrations, has been conducting a vast military build-up against China which has gone hand in hand with the cultivation of aggressive military alliances in the region as well as diplomatic and economic provocations. The aim is to reverse the decline of American capitalism amid China's rise including, if necessary, through war.

As part of this campaign, the Trump administration expanded relations with Taiwan. This has been further escalated under his successor, Joe Biden, including with an

announcement earlier this month that his administration would ease restrictions on contact between US and Taiwanese officials.

It is these US moves to establish diplomatic and military relations with Taiwan that are overturning the status quo by calling into question its decades-long acceptance of the “One China” policy under which Beijing is the recognised government of all China, including Taiwan. The US is recklessly inflaming the most dangerous flashpoint for conflict in Asia.

None of this is acknowledged by the Australian political and media establishment, nor are the disastrous implications of a conflict that would inevitably involve the use of not only ballistic and other missiles, but also nuclear weapons.

Instead, propaganda about “Chinese aggression” is being pushed to justify Australia’s alignment with the US-led drive to war which has been deepened by every government, Labor and Liberal-National, since Obama unveiled his aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China in 2011.

Dutton’s installation as defence minister late last month was tied to a further integration of Australia in US preparations for conflict. His appointment was hailed by the most hawkish sections of the media who bemoaned the lack of a “strategic focus” and an aggressive public presence of his predecessor Linda Reynolds.

Since taking over the role, Dutton has announced that Australia will begin its own missile building program, for the first time since the 1960s, as part of a broader \$270 billion spend on military hardware over this decade. He has declared that he will resolve the issues with other crisis-ridden defence projects, including the repeatedly delayed plans to build 12 Attack Class submarines. The task, Dutton has stated, is to “ensure we have adequate supply of weapon stock holdings to sustain combat operations if global supply chains are disrupted.”

In his ABC interview, Dutton also foreshadowed a broader crackdown on economic deals with China. Last Thursday, the Coalition government cancelled agreements between the state government of Victoria and the Chinese authorities for economic cooperation on vague “national security” grounds. Thousands of other deals are reportedly being scrutinised, with the list of blacklisted projects tipped to grow.

The other thrust of the government statements on Anzac Day was a full-throated glorification of the protracted occupation of Afghanistan following the announcement of a US and Australian withdrawal by the end of the year. Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that Australian troops who had fought in the conflict were the “bravest of their generation.”

Dutton stated that Australian troops had fought with “distinction and honour” in a conflict supposedly waged to

defeat terrorism, ensure stability and advance human rights, including those of Afghan women.

These statements continue a provocative government campaign to dismiss the significance of war crimes committed by Australian special forces that were documented in the official Brereton Inquiry, which found “credible evidence” of the murder of at least 39 Afghan civilians, torture and other atrocities.

In the lead-up to Anzac Day, Dutton overruled a recommendation from the Brereton Inquiry for the removal of a “meritorious citation” awarded to the Special Operations Task Group. The award honoured the group for its activities over the same period during which the alleged war crimes took place.

He and his other ministers have insisted that it is necessary to focus on rebuilding troop “morale” and on the “core business” of the military, which his assistant minister Andrew Hastie described as the “application of lethal force.”

Dutton also hailed Australia’s participation in the Afghan occupation for having strengthened the military alliance with the United States. By this logic, involvement in other US-led wars, including in the Asia-Pacific, would further improve the alliance.

While some sections of business may be fearful of the economic consequences of confrontation and conflict with China, the political and media establishment is fully committed to it. Dutton’s statements about a possible military conflict have been reported as matter of fact, without any critical commentary. For its part, the Labor Party opposition is no less committed to the US alliance and has pitched itself as a more reliable partner for the Biden administration as it escalates its war drive.



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