Australian senator calls for end to One China policy

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Last weekend, Australian Senator Rex Patrick joined the growing international chorus, orchestrated from Washington, suggesting that it is time to abandon the "One China" policy that has been the foundation of diplomatic relations with China since the early 1970s.

Following the 1949 Chinese revolution, Chiang Kai-shek, his nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) and defeated armies fled to Taiwan where they established a military dictatorship protected by the US Navy.

This abruptly changed after Nixon's visit to China in 1972 where he met with Mao Zedong and concluded a de-facto anti-Soviet alliance. The US and other countries established diplomatic relations on the basis that they recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan. The US ended its formal ties with Taipei.

A half century later, the Biden administration, following on from Obama and Trump, is escalating a dangerous confrontation with China on all fronts—including in the South and East China Seas and allegations of China's human rights abuses, particularly of Muslim Uyghurs.

Biden, following on from Trump, is also strengthening ties with Taiwan, in moves that effectively nullify the "One China" policy in practice, though not formally. While inflaming what is potentially the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia, Washington is accusing Beijing of "aggression." In March, Admiral Phil Davidson, the retiring US Pacific Fleet commander, warned of war with China over Taiwan within six years.

Senator Patrick's comments are an explicit call for an end to the One China policy—a step that would dramatically heighten tensions between Australia and China, potentially ending diplomatic relations.

Patrick condemned the "One China" policy as "political sophistry [that] has now run its course." He called on the Australian government to consult with the US and other allies on a common approach to "this foreign policy orthodoxy that is no longer credible and is becoming unsustainable."

Patrick is not a member of the ruling Liberal-National Coalition or the opposition Labor Party. He was appointed to the Senate in 2017 as a replacement for the right-wing populist Nick Xenophon who resigned. While he joined Xenophon's South Australian-based Centre Alliance, Patrick left in 2020 to form his own Rex Patrick Team party in January 2021.

As a so-called independent, Patrick's comments do not carry the weight of a senior government or opposition spokesperson. However, given his close ties to the military establishment and thus to Washington, his call for ending the "One China" policy is significant. Patrick was a submariner in the Australian navy for more than a decade, then from 1995 worked in the defence industries that have a strong presence in South Australia.

Patrick's justification for abandoning the One China policy follows the line from Washington—the need to defend Taiwan's "vibrant democracy" against Chinese threats to reintegrate the island using military force. "China's refusal to renounce the use of force against Taiwan, and their increasing preparedness to do so, make Australia's 'one China' policy incompatible with our support for democracy and self-determination, and our strategic interests," he declared.

In fact, Beijing has a longstanding policy of seeking the peaceful unification of Taiwan, but has consistently warned that it would use force if Taipei declared formal independence from China. Yet that is exactly what the US is encouraging by stepping up military arms sales and high-level contact with Taiwan.

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Beijing fears that the US is seeking to re-establish formal military ties and a military presence on Taiwan that could once again transform it into a forward operating US base directed against the Chinese mainland less than 200 kilometres away.

Washington's defence of Taiwanese "democracy" is entirely hypocritical, given its support of the brutal KMT dictatorship on Taiwan for decades. The regime only began holding direct elections for the presidency and legislature in the 1990s in the face of mass popular opposition and a wave of strikes by the working class. Behind the "democratic" façade, much of the anti-communist police-state apparatus of the dictatorship remains in force.

In reality, Patrick's actual argument is that it is in Australia's "strategic interests" to remain in tune with US imperialism as it prepares for war against China. Since World War II, Australia, a middle-order imperialist power, has depended completely on its alliance with the US to prosecute its own interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

The senator's remarks, which were prominently reported in the Murdoch media, reflect US pressure on its key allies in Asia to line up with every aspect of its anti-China campaign, including the heightened focus on Taiwan and the "One China" policy.

Patrick himself noted that Japan's deputy defence minister Yasuhide Nakayama had in late June also called the "One China" policy into question. Nakayama declared that Taiwan represented a "red line of the 21st century," and, like Patrick, claimed it was necessary to "protect Taiwan as a democratic country."

Patrick likened China to Hitler's fascist regime in Germany, declaring that "the Chinese Communist Party's recent destruction of Hong Kong's democratic institutions is comparable to Nazi Germany's 1936 remilitarisation of the Rhineland. A failure to support Taiwan's democracy and autonomy would be comparable with the Munich settlement of 1938 and the resultant Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia."

These remarks stand reality on its head. It is US imperialism in its historic decline that increasingly takes on the visage of fascism and its aggressive military expansionism. Indeed, the US has been more or less continuously at war for the past 30 years, including through the criminal military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, as it sought to dominate the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Over the past 10 years, starting with Obama's "pivot to Asia," successive US administrations have been preparing for war with China, which the US regards as the chief threat to its global domination. The Obama administration deliberately inflamed longstanding, low-level regional territorial disputes in the South China Sea into a major flashpoint and guaranteed US military backing for Japan in its dispute with China in the East China Sea.

Under Trump, however, Taiwan increasingly came into focus as a dangerous potential trigger for war. Having repeatedly breached longstanding diplomatic protocols barring contact with top Taiwanese officials, politicians and military officers, Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, in his final days in office, ended all barriers to such meetings. With minor modifications, the Biden administration has maintained that policy.

Patrick's questioning of the "One China" policy will not be the last. It is the start of moves within the ruling establishment to ensure Australia is completely committed to the US war drive against China.

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