

The danger of US-China war and Australia's anti-democratic election laws

Peter Symonds
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The new anti-democratic election laws in Australia, aimed at deregistering so-called minor parties, go hand in hand with the efforts of the political and media establishment to stifle and censor public debate on the most important issues facing working people.

War between the United States and China, the world's largest and second largest economies, both nuclear-armed, is an ever-growing danger. And successive governments—Coalition and Labor with the backing of the Greens—have placed Australia on the frontline of a US-China conflict.

Nothing could make this clearer than the military agreement reached between the US, the United Kingdom and Australia in mid-September. The AUKUS pact revives the World War II alliance in the Pacific—this time directed against China, not Japan.

A key element of the AUKUS agreement is the provision of nuclear-powered attack submarines to Australia—only the second time that the US has ever shared this sophisticated technology. These submarines have no defensive purpose. They are designed to operate at long distance—that is, in strategic waters off the Chinese mainland for protracted periods of time.

No one should believe the claims of Prime Minister Scott Morrison that Australia will not develop a civilian nuclear industry or build nuclear weapons. Already the announcement has renewed debate on establishing a civilian capacity. And even if it does not build atomic weapons itself, Australia, in the event of conflict, would come under enormous pressure from Washington to arm its submarines with US nuclear missiles.

Morrison's timetable for building the submarines two decades down the track is just as fanciful. Already pressure is mounting from pro-US media mouthpieces for Australia to buy American nuclear submarines off

the shelf.

Washington's timetable for war with China is years, not decades. In March, US Admiral Phil Davidson warned of conflict with China over Taiwan within six years and called for a huge increase in the budget for the US-Indo Pacific Command that would be involved in such a war.

The very fact that Taiwan—potentially the most explosive flashpoint for conflict between the US and China—has erupted to the fore this year is the sharpest of warnings. The US accuses Beijing of threatening the status quo over Taiwan. But Washington is rapidly unravelling diplomatic protocols that have kept an uneasy peace in the Taiwan Strait by provocatively boosting ties with Taipei and stationing US troops on Taiwan for the first time since 1979.

The Australian media and politicians, Labor and Coalition, dutifully parrot the current line from Washington, churning out a constant stream of noxious anti-China propaganda in various forms. Denunciations of "human rights" abuses in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet go hand in hand with accusations of Chinese "aggression" in the South and East China Seas and toward Taiwan; and unsubstantiated claims of cyber spying and intellectual property theft.

A handful of establishment figures have criticised the AUKUS agreement. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating lashed out at the Morrison government and the Labor opposition for "shopping" Australia's sovereignty by "locking the country and its military forces into the force structure of the United States."

Keating joins others in advocating a more independent Australian foreign policy. However, Australia, a mid-order imperialist power, has always relied on the great power of the day—first Britain, then America during World War II—to prosecute its strategic

interests. The price has been the lives of many tens of thousands of Australian soldiers squandered in every imperialist conflict, from World Wars I and II to Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, to satisfy the venal ambitions of the Australian ruling class.

There is no anti-war faction in the Australian ruling elite. Keating is not opposed to war and supports the US alliance. He was part of the Hawke Labor government that committed Australian troops to the 1990–91 US-led Gulf War. Rather he speaks for sections of the Australian corporate elite fearful of the impact of tensions with China on their profits.

Neither do pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, oppose the US war drive against China. In various ways, they echo Washington's propaganda about Chinese "aggressiveness," play down the danger of war, or line up with figures like Keating in urging an independent foreign policy.

The burdens of these accelerating war preparations are being imposed on the working class. The tens of billions of dollars to be wasted on nuclear-powered submarines, on top of other huge and increasing military spending, will be extracted from essential social services—public health, education and welfare—already under severe strain after decades of austerity measures and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is no coincidence that the AUKUS agreement was sealed just a fortnight after the anti-democratic electoral laws were rammed through parliament. Australian involvement in US-led wars over the past three decades has been accompanied by a constant stream of legislation designed to muzzle anti-war opposition. The "foreign interference" laws passed in 2018, with bipartisan support amid a deluge of anti-China hysteria, were aimed particularly at outlawing internationally-coordinated campaigns—including against war.

The Socialist Equality Party has been alone in warning about the danger of war posed by the increasingly US aggressive stance toward China, which began with President Obama's announcement of the "pivot to Asia" in the Australian parliament in 2011—a policy that has been continued and intensified under Trump and Biden.

We have explained the futility of appealing to the powers-that-be in Australia, the US or anywhere else to pull back. The fundamental driving force is the

determination of US imperialism to prevent the threat to its global dominance by China through all means, including military. That is now compounded by the profound economic, social and political crisis engulfing American imperialism, which is fuelling a vicious anti-China campaign aimed at turning social tensions outward against a foreign "enemy."

The danger of war, like the pandemic and climate change, cannot be combatted at a national level. It necessitates a globally coordinated campaign by the international working class against the root cause of war—the outmoded profit system and its division of the world into competing nation states. Without such a mobilisation, the world is hurtling toward a catastrophic war between the world's two largest economies.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, while it is not primarily responsible for the drive to war, has no progressive solution. Its appeals to Washington for a compromise are futile. Its military spending accelerates an arms race that can only end in disaster. Mired in nationalism, the CCP is incapable of making any appeal to workers internationally.

The SEP and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International are alone in campaigning for a unified international anti-war movement of the working class. We urge all our readers and supporters to oppose the anti-democratic electoral laws and sign up as electoral members to ensure the SEP will have its name on ballot papers and workers can vote consciously for a socialist alternative.



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