

British, Australian ministers strengthen military collaboration against China

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In the wake of the AUKUS pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States reached last September, the British and Australian foreign and defence ministers held talks in Sydney yesterday to further strengthen military ties directed primarily against China, and also Russia.

The AUKUS agreement, which includes equipping Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, is part of the US-led military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific as Washington intensifies its aggressive confrontation with China diplomatically, economically and strategically.

At a joint press conference, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss declared that the two countries were “modernising our partnership for a new age” to confront “the reality ... that threats are rising across the world.” As well as lashing out at Russia for “threatening Ukraine” and Iran over its nuclear program, Truss accused China of “using its economic muscle against Australia and other allies like Lithuania.”

Truss told reporters that Australia and Britain were “completely united in our response. We’re standing shoulder to shoulder in defence of freedom and democracy, and we’re determined to face down these growing threats.”

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne trotted out the same propaganda line to justify the military build-up by the two countries in league with the US. Australia and Britain were natural partners, she said, to counter the influence of “malign authoritarianism” and maintain the international order.

For all the unsubstantiated allegations of Russian and Chinese “threats” and “aggression,” Australian and British imperialism have been two of the closest partners in crime of the US over the past three decades.

London and Canberra have backed the illegal US-led invasions and interventions in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia to the hilt politically and militarily. These have resulted in the destruction of whole societies—in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan.

Now Britain and Australia are preparing to join the US in confronting two nuclear-armed powers, China and Russia, raising the prospect of a catastrophic war. None of this is about defending democracy, which is under sustained attack in all three countries. Rather, the AUKUS pact is seeking to maintain the US global hegemony on which Australia and Britain have both relied since the end of World War II, but which is being undermined by the economic rise of China in particular.

The escalation of the British military presence in the Indo-Pacific—a region half way around the world from the United Kingdom—is especially significant. Following World War II and its declining global influence, Britain withdrew from “East of the Suez” from 1966, pulling its military out of major bases in Aden (now part of Yemen) and Singapore. It has not consistently sent warships to the Indo-Pacific since the closure of its small base in Hong Kong in 1997 when the colony was returned to China.

Last March the British government adopted a so-called Indo-Pacific Tilt, as part of its 2021 Integrated Review, and in September signed up to the AUKUS agreement. The British navy dispatched the Queen Elizabeth II aircraft carrier and its strike group of warships to the Indo-Pacific where it engaged in various exercises, including provocative joint drills in the South China Sea with Dutch and Singaporean naval vessels in October.

Speaking to the press yesterday, Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton explained that no agreement had been reached as yet on basing British warships in

Australia. However, “it could be something that we discuss at an appropriate time” in the future. “I think what you will see is a greater regularity in visits, training, in people being embedded... and certainly greater cooperation in exercises.”

Britain has already dispatched two of its newest warships—the offshore patrol vessels, HMS Spey and HMS Tamar—to the Asian region on a long-term basis as part of re-establishing “a persistent Indo-Pacific presence.” While not permanently based in Australia, the two British naval vessels will rely heavily on Australian naval infrastructure for port visits, resupply and maintenance.

The two countries also agreed to strengthen military coordination and planning by embedding a liaison officer from Britain’s Permanent Joint Headquarters within Australia’s Headquarters Joint Operations Command.

Australia and Britain are part of the top-level Five Eyes intelligence sharing network, led by the US, which also includes New Zealand and Canada. The ministerial meeting yesterday strengthened collaboration on cyber security, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and undersea capabilities.

Truss used a speech to the Sydney-based think tank, the Lowy Institute, to issue strident warnings about the threat of a Russian invasion of the Ukraine and its dire consequences. In reality, the US and its allies have manufactured the present crisis over Ukraine through the military encroachment of NATO forces into Eastern Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

At yesterday’s press conference, Payne joined the international anti-Russia chorus, declaring “we will work closely with Ukraine in the coming days and weeks in terms of challenges that they are dealing with.” She indicated that Australia would look favourably on any formal request from the Ukraine for assistance on cyber-security.

Asked yesterday about the talks in Sydney, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian branded the AUKUS agreement as “a typical military bloc” and the decision to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines as a breach of the international Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. He pointed to the hypocrisy of the US, Britain and Australia hyping the “China threat” while collaborating in a military build-up in the region.

The provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia underscores the aggressive character of the AUKUS agreement. The attack submarines have nothing to do with the defence of Australian waters but are designed to operate at great distances for lengthy periods of time. Their purpose is to operate in concert with British and American nuclear submarines off the Chinese coast, either as part of a naval blockade or a full-scale war.

Last September, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that Australia had no intention of creating a domestic nuclear industry or arming the nuclear-powered submarines with nuclear missiles. As geo-political tensions continue to rise, such pledges are meaningless.

Australia’s deep integration into US war planning has placed the Australian population on the front-line of a US-led conflict with China that has the potential to rapidly escalate into a nuclear war.



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