

Crisis-wracked Australian government ramps up war drumbeating

Mike Head
18 February 2022

Facing an acute political and public health crisis, the unravelling Liberal-National Coalition government has turned to inflammatory warmongering, echoing the Biden administration's stepped-up threats and accusations against Russia over the Ukraine, and also China.

This fortnight's parliamentary session—the last scheduled before a brief March 29 federal budget sitting and then a possible May election—saw unprecedented attacks by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the official Labor Party opposition, virtually accusing its leaders of being treasonous agents of China.

Morrison told parliament the Chinese government had “picked their horse” in the election and, pointing at Labor leader Anthony Albanese, said “and he is sitting right there!” Morrison then accused Labor deputy leader Richard Marles of being a “Manchurian candidate.” He doubled down on Defence Minister Peter Dutton's earlier accusation that Albanese was “China's pick.”

Morrison, Dutton and Treasurer Josh Frydenberg have also parroted the US claims of an “imminent” Russian invasion of Ukraine and depicted Russia and China as twin aggressors. Morrison provocatively declared that the global order was endangered by a “coalition of autocracies.”

The frenzied character of these accusations can be understood only as the result of two inter-connected developments. One is Washington's escalating preparations for war against both Russia and China and its demand that the Australian ruling elite play a frontline and confrontational role, particularly against China.

Any war of aggression by the US and NATO against Russia would almost certainly drag China into what would be a nuclear war for domination over the Eurasian landmass. Indo-Pacific countries, such as Japan and Australia, would be drawn into the conflagration with China, which US imperialism regards as the greatest threat to its global power.

The other factor is the worsening dysfunctionality of Morrison's government. It is presiding over an ongoing COVID-19 disaster, which now includes thousands of infections in schools. As a result, it confronts collapsing

approval ratings and rising working-class unrest as seen in this week's statewide New South Wales nurses' strike, despite the efforts of Labor and the trade unions to contain the discontent and prevent a social explosion.

For all the war rhetoric, the just-ended session of parliament saw the government virtually paralysed, beset by internal revolts and unable to pass any legislation without Labor's votes. No less than 13 MPs, including six ministers, are quitting at the election and factional warfare involving Morrison has prevented the Liberal Party from even selecting election candidates for key seats in NSW.

According to various media reports, Dutton and Frydenberg are vying for support within the Liberal Party to replace Morrison, with polling showing the government heading for defeat, above all because of the continuing toll of infections, hospitalisations and deaths caused by Australia's governments that have dismantled safety measures and let the Omicron variant rip through society.

Labor leader Albanese has responded to the “China's pick” charges by not just reiterating Labor's total commitment to the US military alliance but presenting Labor as even more committed than the Coalition. He said Labor had opposed the 2015 lease of the civilian port of the northern strategic city of Darwin to a Chinese company—a decision for which President Barack Obama rebuked the Coalition government.

Albanese said he was part of the 2007–2013 Labor government that “put the US marines here [in Darwin], that upgraded our defence relationship with the US,” when Julia Gillard was prime minister. That contribution to the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia” to confront China was in line with Labor's active support for every act of US militarism since the first US invasion of Iraq in 1990–91.

The Labor leader also displayed in parliament a personal letter that Morrison had sent him last year to thank him for Labor's bipartisan backing for the AUKUS agreement. The military pact signed by the US, the UK and Australia in September included the provision of nuclear-power attack submarines to Australia.

There are evident concerns in ruling circles, including within the US-linked intelligence apparatus, that the Coalition government might not be able to govern effectively in the event of a catastrophic war, and that a Labor-led government may be needed to contain and suppress dissent and opposition.

Significantly, the current chief of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Mike Burgess and former ASIO director-general Dennis Richardson publicly warned the Morrison government that it was endangering “bipartisanship” by “politicising national security.”

Richardson, an insider who is also a former head of the foreign affairs and defence departments and an Australian ambassador to Washington, pointedly warned that “the attempt to create an artificial division where one in practice does not exist only serves the interests of one country, and that’s China.”

Similarly, the *Australian’s* editor-at-large Paul Kelly described the bipartisanship with Labor as a “national asset” that was needed to assure “support from the public” for the conflict with China. That expresses the anxiety in the ruling class that a US-led war with Russia or China would trigger deep anti-war sentiment.

Australia’s frontline part in US militarism was highlighted by this month’s three-day visit to the country by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. He then travelled to Fiji and Hawaii for talks with governments and also officials from Japan and South Korea, two other key powers in the US confrontation with China and Russia.

In the midst of Washington’s efforts to goad Russia into a military conflict, Blinken gave media interviews and public addresses in Australia in which he accused China of trying to militarily and economically dominate the entire world, and declared that Biden understood that the 21st century would be shaped primarily by what happened in the Indo-Pacific.

Labor’s crucial political role in backing the US was underscored by the remarks of US officials, in a conference call with journalists, after Blinken met with Albanese and opposition spokeswoman on foreign affairs Penny Wong. The officials said they were confident of Labor’s backing. They “came away reassured that these principles that we hold dear and are vitally important to the alliance transcends politics and any one party.”

Despite these assurances, the Murdoch media is further trying to whip up a wartime atmosphere by urging the Coalition government to “apply the blowtorch” to demand that Labor adopt a yet more confrontational stand against China. A February 16 *Australian* editorial accused Albanese of taking an “each-way bet” last year when he said Australia had to deal with China “in a mature way, not by being

provocative for the sake of it to make a domestic political point.”

The editorial also accused Labor of cutting military spending when last in office. In fact, the 2007–13 Labor government maintained that spending—around \$25 billion each year—at the same level of gross domestic product (GDP) as the preceding Howard Coalition government. From 2010 to 2013, Gillard’s minority government was kept in office by the Greens as it signed up to Obama’s “pivot.” Since then, however, Washington has demanded that its allies allocate at least 2 percent of the GDP to the military, so that the Coalition government’s annual spending has soared to around \$45 billion.

Regardless of the fate of the Morrison government, these developments are a stark warning of the readiness of the Australian ruling class and all its political servants, including the Coalition, Labor and Greens, to sacrifice lives in another world war, just as they have done already via the “live with the virus” program, for the sake of corporate profit.

Workers must reject with contempt the poisonous pro-war propaganda and nationalism being pumped out by the political establishment and the corporate media. As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) explained in its February 14 statement “Oppose the US-NATO drive to war with Russia in Ukraine!” the US allegations of an impending Russian invasion of Ukraine are just as fabricated as the “weapons of mass destruction” lie that provided the pretext for the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq.

For the past three decades, US imperialism has seized upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union to seek to reinforce and extend the global hegemony it asserted after World War II. Washington has waged war repeatedly, causing devastation in the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia

As the ICFI statement insists: “Millions of war dead must not be added to the millions dead from the pandemic. It is of the utmost urgency that workers build an independent anti-war movement on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.”



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