Bipartisan line-up in Australia behind US moves against Russia

Mike Head
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Backed fully by the opposition Labor Party, Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government has responded "lockstep" with the Biden administration in blaming Russia for the Ukraine crisis and imposing "severe" sanctions on Russian entities and individuals.

While also following the White House in not committing troops to the Ukraine, the government has offered full-throated political support to the US and has effectively intervened militarily by offering to assist the Ukrainian military, including in cyber warfare against Russia.

Matching the US, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government has withdrawn all Australian diplomatic representatives from Ukraine and urged Australians to leave the country, heightening the sense of alarm and a wartime atmosphere.

Addressing a media conference yesterday, following an "emergency" meeting of the cabinet national security committee, Morrison declared that a Russian "invasion of Ukraine has effectively already begun." The comments, echoing those of Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, demonstrate that the US and its allies are not seeking to deescalate the crisis, but to ramp it up further.

Morrison hypocritically branded Russian President Vladimir Putin a "thug" and a "bully." The language is that of war, not diplomacy.

This is from a man and a government that has supported every violent and murderous military invasion launched by the US to assert its global hegemony, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya.

Morrison provided few details of the Australian sanctions, except that they would include travel bans. He said they would be ratcheted up in "lockstep" with the US, UK and other governments. He declined to rule out expelling Russia's ambassador and other diplomats, saying that would depend on whether other governments took such actions.

Morrison refused to provide any information on the military assistance being committed to Ukraine. On Saturday, he had declared that Australia was ready to provide "practical" assistance to Ukraine in conjunction with allies, but said it would be irresponsible to "telecast" Australia's plans.

Defence Minister Peter Dutton, who is one of Morrison's leadership rivals in the unstable and unpopular government, said there was an opportunity for Australia to provide support to Ukraine "by way of basic equipment."

Foreign Minister Marise Payne said Australia would expand its existing "cyber training" for Ukrainian officials and could join a coalition to provide Ukraine with military equipment.

Labor's leaders are equally aggressive. In fact, they urged the government to go further. Party leader Anthony Albanese branded Russia's decision to send forces into the separatist-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk regions of the Ukraine as "completely unacceptable."

Speaking before the national security committee meeting, Albanese called on the Morrison government to "stand united" with the US and its allies. "There needs to be action taken and the Australian government must be a part of that action," he declared.

The Labor leader offered carte blanche bipartisan support for any decision made by the government and the US-linked intelligence apparatus. "I would welcome any action that the Government sees fit, based upon the advice that they'll be receiving from the security agencies today."

On Tuesday, Albanese issued a joint statement with Labor's shadow foreign minister Penny Wong, condemning "Russia's continuing aggression" and urging the government to withdraw Australia's ambassador to Russia and offer "technical military assistance" to the Ukraine, "as well as stepping up cyber security support."

In response to Morrison's press conference yesterday, Albanese declared that "Australians stand as one" in the aggression against Russia.

The Labor leader again emphasised his full-throated support for the US-led campaign and the war propaganda accompanying it, declaring: "Australia stands against aggression, and the aggressor here is Putin. It is not the people of Ukraine, it is not the government of Ukraine, it is

not NATO, it is not the United States, it is Vladimir Putin and Russia."

The government's sanctions add to those it imposed on Russia in 2014 after the downing of flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014, a tragedy for which it automatically blamed Russia, and the annexation of Crimea, which developed in response to the 2014 regime-change putsch organised by the US and Germany.

Bans will be imposed on trade and investment in the transport, energy, telecommunications, oil, gas and mineral reserves sectors in the breakaway Luhansk and Donetsk regions, extending existing bans on Crimea and Sevastopol.

Given the relatively small size of Australian trade with Russia, the sanctions are expected to have minimal direct impact on the Russian economy. Reportedly, they will mainly affect Russian investors who might have interests or funds in Australia. Individuals can be targeted on a wide range of vague grounds under US-style Magnitsky sanctions laws passed last December with Labor's backing.

The bipartisan line-up behind the US-led confrontation with Russia is being accompanied by a barrage of anti-Russian propaganda throughout the corporate media. "Russia crosses the line" was the banner headline in yesterday's *Australian*, the Murdoch media flagship. "'Worst case scenario': Russia invades Ukraine," declared the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*.

This wall-to-wall blitz is designed to poison public opinion in preparation for war and cover over the real driving forces behind the conflict, which lie in Washington, not Moscow. 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!" 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.

Media outlets are deliberately linking the Ukraine conflict to China, which US imperialism regards as the greatest threat to its global power. Yesterday's *Australian* editorial bracketed China into the demand for "action," supposedly to stop "a march of the tyrants."

Any war by the US and NATO against Russia would almost certainly drag China into what could well be a nuclear war for domination over the Eurasian landmass, which the US has long sought to bring under its thumb. Japan and Australia, close allies of the US, would be drawn into the conflagration with China.

Over the past three weeks, as Washington has escalated the Ukraine crisis, there has been an increasingly frenzied anti-China witch hunt in Australia, also driven by a deepening domestic political crisis. Morrison and his ministers have accused Labor's leaders of being "China's pick" in the looming federal election. In response, Albanese and his shadow ministers have ramped-up their own charges against China and their total commitment to the US military alliance.

This week, the government—backed by Labor—provocatively accused China of "aggression," "intimidation" and "bullying" after a Chinese naval vessel reportedly pointed a laser at an Australian surveillance plane.

Significantly, media polls indicate that the China scare campaign has failed to reverse the government's collapsing approval ratings. A Resolve Political Monitor published by Nine Media outlets yesterday showed that from January to February, Morrison's net performance rating fell from minus 10 to minus 17.

There is widespread anti-war sentiment and distrust of the entire political establishment. Many people recall the "weapons of mass destruction" lie that provided the pretext for the barbaric US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq.

This antipathy to the war-mongering agenda has to be translated into support for a global anti-war movement, based on the working class. That must be informed by an historical understanding that the danger of a World War III is produced by the efforts of US imperialism to maintain the dominant power it obtained via the first two global conflagrations.

For that purpose, the WSWS is this weekend hosting an international online webinar, "Fight COVID! Save Lives! Stop the drive to World War III!" Speakers will elaborate a political program to mobilise the working class against war and the pandemic. We urge our readers to register and attend this critical event.

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