

Australian Labor government already functioning as US attack dog in the Pacific

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In the days since the Australian federal election, the incoming Labor government has been on a foreign policy whirlwind. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his foreign minister, Penny Wong, have wasted no time in signalling that their Labor government will function as an attack dog for the Biden administration, and its preparations for war against China.

Saturday's election registered the lowest combined vote for Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition ever. Labor's primary vote is the smallest of an incoming government in Australian history. Almost a week after the election, it remains unclear that Labor has even secured the 76 seats required to form a majority government.

Notwithstanding the vote count, Albanese and Wong, with the support of the corporate press, have proceeded as if the result was already determined. A five-man interim government was sworn-in on Monday in record time. And by Tuesday, Albanese and Wong were in Japan to attend a meeting of the Quad, a de facto military alliance of the US, Australia, Japan and India, directed against China.

Prior to that meeting, US President Joe Biden declared that his administration was prepared to go to war with China over Taiwan. The statement was one of a series by top US officials, stepping-up a decade-long anti-China campaign aimed at ensuring American imperialist hegemony, to the point of inciting a direct conflict.

Albanese and Wong stressed that the Labor government would collaborate as closely as possible with the Biden administration in the region.

The *Australian* reported that Biden, along with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, national security advisor Jake Sullivan and the White House Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell, "were understood to have discussed with Mr Albanese and Senator Wong rising geostrategic competition in the South Pacific after Solomon Islands signed a security agreement with China last month."

The Murdoch-owned publication continued: "The *Australian* understands Mr Biden's senior advisers were 'very positive' about working with the Albanese

government to expand the reach of the Quad and allies in the Pacific."

Immediately after that meeting, it was announced that Wong was visiting Fiji, as part of what the *Australian* described as a "Pacific blitz." The timing indicates that Wong was effectively dispatched to the Pacific state by Biden and his top national security personnel.

Wong is set to visit most of the other Pacific countries over the coming weeks. Albanese is reportedly preparing to travel to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea "as a priority." Both will attend the Pacific Island Forum in mid-July.

Wong's primary speaking engagement in Fiji, at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, was peppered with paternalistic rhetoric about Australia's commitment to the "Pacific family," and motherhood statements about Labor's concern over the impact of climate change in the region. The latter pitch is especially threadbare, given that Labor's primary climate commitment during the election campaign was to allow the development of new coal and gas mines.

There was, nevertheless, a sting in the tail. "We will draw on all elements of our relationships to achieve our shared interests in building a stable and prosperous region, where rules and sovereignty are respected," Wong stated. The "rules" are those being laid down by the US and its deputy sheriffs in the region, Australia and New Zealand.

"As fellow members of the Pacific Family, our security and prosperity is truly a thing we achieve together, or not at all," Wong declared.

In the context of what has come before, the message would have been plainly received: stay inside the US tent or face the consequences. Wong's reference to "sovereignty" was particularly ironic, given that together with the former Australian Coalition government and Biden administration, Labor has spent the past month trashing the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands.

The pact between the Solomons and China, revealed in April, touched off militarist hysteria in the US and Australia. Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that the establishment of a Chinese military facility on the Solomons

was Australia's "red line," a direct threat of military intervention. Indo-Pacific coordinator Campbell said the US would "respond accordingly" to any such base. As Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare stated, these were nothing short of threats of an invasion.

For its part, Labor sought to outflank Morrison from the right, declaring that his government had committed the "greatest foreign policy failure in the Pacific" by allowing the deal to proceed. The clear implication, in the context of Campbell's threats and an ongoing US destabilisation campaign against Sogavare, is that drastic action should have been taken to scuttle the deal.

The aggressive character of Wong's visit was underscored by its timing. She arrived in Fiji the same day that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi began a tour of eight Pacific nations. The Australian press has obtained a copy of a five-year cooperation agreement that Wang is offering to ten Pacific countries.

Media reports have focused on aspects of the deal which would purportedly expand security collaboration, including Chinese assistance to local police forces and cybersecurity operations, as well as maritime mapping. The agreement, however, also would reportedly offer the nations that sign up substantial foreign aid, together with favourable trade terms and access to China's massive domestic market.

Speaking in Honiara, the Solomons capital, Wang said "China's cooperation with Pacific Island countries does not target any country." He warned against "interference" in the affairs of Pacific states, and pointedly stated: "All the Pacific Island countries are entitled to make their own choice instead of being just mere followers of others."

For all of the rhetoric about a "Pacific family," Australian imperialism treats the Pacific as a colonial backyard. Its sole preoccupations are dominating the region's rich natural resources, ensuring primacy in the geo-strategically critical Pacific Ocean, and exploiting the local populations, including as a source of cheap labour.

Despite its declarations of a "Pacific focus," Labor has pledged only half a billion dollars over four years for the entire region. When Tonga was devastated by a volcano and tsunami earlier this year, initial US aid was \$100,000, with that pitiful offering followed by just \$2.5 million more. Australia provided \$3 million in relief and New Zealand less than a million.

In other words, the US and its allies have little to offer the Pacific states but threats and bullying. Albanese, commenting on Wang's tour, declared: "This is China seeking to increase its influence in the region of the world where Australia has been the security partner of choice since the Second World War." Australia would "respond" with a "step up."

The focus on the Pacific demonstrates how advanced the war plans are. The references to World War II are not accidental. It was out of that conflict that the US established its hegemony throughout the region, transforming the Pacific Ocean into the "American lake." The Pacific Islands had been the scene of some of the bloodiest battles of that conflict.

Today, they are to play a crucial role in the US preparations for an offensive war against China. Control of the sea lanes near the Pacific Islands would be critical in the air-sea battle that the Pentagon and its allies, including Australia, have mapped out.

Labor's foreign policy frenzy, in support of these war aims, underscores the character of the Australian election as a conspiracy against the population. The new government has no mandate. The election confirmed only that Labor's base of support among working people no longer exists because of mass hostility to the bipartisan program of militarism, austerity and mass COVID infection.

The escalating drive to war abroad will be accompanied by a war against the working class at home.

Duncan Lewis, the former head of ASIO, Australia's domestic spy agency, declared earlier this week that military spending would have to be increased to far more than two or three percent of gross domestic product. This would be necessary to finance the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and other offensive weaponry.

Lewis told the ANU National Security Podcast: "At a time when we have great debt, spending more on defence is obviously going to impact standard of living and essentially the kind of the personal prosperity of Australians. That is going to require a particular social licence to be obtained by government."

In other words, guns not butter. Working people must pay for the crazed war-drive, which threatens a global catastrophe, through cuts to their living standards, their healthcare and their education.

In his own way, and despite his intentions, Lewis was pointing to the essential connection between the fight against war, and the struggle for all of the social rights of the working class, in opposition to the political establishment, the ballooning military-intelligence apparatus and the capitalist system they defend.



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