

Australia's new Labor foreign minister back in the Pacific on US-instigated anti-China mission

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The new Labor government has spent its first fortnight in office aggressively prosecuting a US-led campaign in the Pacific, aimed at shoring-up the regional hegemony of American and Australian imperialism and furthering the advanced preparations for war against China.

On Wednesday evening, Labor's foreign minister Penny Wong travelled to Samoa and Tonga, in a snap visit announced earlier that day. In a statement outlining her itinerary, Wong boasted that it was her second trip to the Pacific since being sworn in as foreign minister "nine days ago."

On May 26, Wong went to Fiji just days after the federal election and well before it was clear that Labor had secured a majority government. There she met with Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama and addressed a gathering of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

The haste of that first trip was clearly a result of the insistence of Washington that the new Labor administration act fast to undermine growing Chinese influence in the Pacific.

Wong was dispatched to Fiji immediately after she attended, with Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, a meeting in Tokyo of the Quad, the de facto anti-China military alliance composed of the US, Japan, India and Australia. Albanese and Wong embarked on the trip to Tokyo only three hours after both were sworn in as part of a hastily cobbled together interim government on the Monday morning following the election.

Wong's May 26 visit was timed to coincide with the beginning of an ambitious regional tour by Chinese foreign minister Wang Li. Over the course of more than a week, Wang, together with a 20-strong Chinese delegation, have visited eight Pacific nations, holding talks with each of their governments.

During her first Pacific trip, Wong had spouted platitudes about the "Pacific family," and had gestured over concerns in the region regarding climate change, despite Labor having just given carte blanche to the Australian ruling elite for the opening of new coal and gas mines during its time in office.

But Wong blurted out the real purpose of Labor's Pacific step-up, telling reporters in Fiji "We have expressed our concerns publicly about the security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China." That deal, revealed in April, was the

subject of a nationalist hysteria in the federal election, led by Labor and featuring veiled threats of military action if China were to establish any sort of naval or army base in the region.

Having referenced the Solomons agreement, Wong added that there would be unspecified "consequences" for similar deals, another clear threat.

The neo-colonial bullying and backroom machinations of Australia, orchestrated by the US, likely played a role in the scuttling of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang's attempts to secure agreement from the Pacific nations for an overarching multilateral agreement with China.

Under the proposal, as many as ten Pacific states would have entered into security arrangements with China, related to policing, cyber-defence and marine mapping, along with substantial foreign aid, favorable trade terms and access to the massive Chinese domestic market.

Micronesia, which has close ties to Washington, vociferously denounced the prospective agreement. Other Pacific leaders issued more neutral comments, explaining that they had not signed up due to insufficient time for consultation and discussion.

Wong's trip on Wednesday to Samoa and Tonga was clearly aimed at pressing the advantage resulting from the failure of the Chinese bilateral framework. Asked about the setback to the Chinese proposal at a press conference in Samoa, Wong declared that its Prime Minister Fiam? Naomi Mata?afa and other Pacific leaders had "shown a lot of leadership and wisdom."

Wong paid lip service to "national sovereignty," having openly attacked it in the case of the Solomons' agreement with China a month before. But "regional security" was a matter for the entire "Pacific family." What "sovereign nations" did, could "ultimately have the potential to affect the nature of the security arrangements of the region, so having a collective consideration of those matters is important."

Despite the vague language in which it was expressed, Wong's idea was clear enough. National sovereignty is fine on paper, but if any of the Pacific Islands take actions that jeopardise US and Australian interests in the region, it is out the

window.

Indicating that the message had been received, Mataʻafa nervously stated that she wanted to clarify “misrepresentations” in the media. Her government had struck a bilateral agreement with Wang, but had not signed up to the Chinese regional framework because “you cannot have a regional agreement when the region hasn’t met to discuss it.”

Mataʻafa’s comments gave the lie to the gloating over the failure of the Chinese regional framework in Washington and Canberra. While the region-wide deal was not accepted, at least five of those who met with Wang signed bilateral agreements with the Chinese delegation, including Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati.

The Chinese state-owned *Global Times* claimed that Wang brokered “52 cooperation pacts, covering 15 domains including those under the Belt and Road Initiative, climate change responding, the pandemic, green development, health, trade and tourism.”

Many of the Pacific states essentially appear to be hedging their bets. Fiji, before signing deals with Wang, agreed to join the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Samoa struck an Economic & Technical Cooperation Agreement with China several days before accepting an eight-year partnership with Australia, ostensibly focused on “social and humanitarian” issues.

The duelling bilateral deals continue to be accompanied by US-led threats. On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern issued a statement, clearly directed against China, which warned that a “persistent military presence in the Pacific by a state that does not share our values or security interests would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region.”

The US and its regional deputy sheriffs in the region, Australia and New Zealand, are engaged in what is sometimes described as “projection.” They are ascribing to China what Washington and its junior partners have carried out for years: a vast military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific, in preparation for war with China. This “pivot to Asia” was initiated under the Obama administration, in which Biden was vice president, and is being taken to a new level under the current US government.

Giving voice to this perspective, the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* international editor Peter Hartcher wrote a column last week, pointing to the strategic issues at stake in the Pacific contest. As a fervent supporter of the US and Australian military-intelligence establishments, Hartcher framed his comment as a warning about China’s regional aspirations, but the areas of concern he outlined are all central to Washington’s strategy in the region.

The Pacific was of importance because of “the enormous, semi-tapped resources, fish stocks and seabed resources and minerals’ controlled by the Pacific islands nations as the owners of their far-flung exclusive economic zones,” Hartcher

wrote, citing fellow war hawk Professor Rory Medcalf.

Hartcher wrote that the Pacific was also strategically critical. “By establishing persistent military access to the Pacific islands nations that sit amid vital shipping lanes, China would acquire the ability to put its boot on Australia’s trade and military lifelines to the US and Asia,” he stated. The columnist went on to reference the crucial role of the Pacific theatre in World War II.

There is no evidence that China has plans for such military facilities. The US, however, has significant installations in the region, including a massive naval base in Guam.

Again, what Hartcher was outlining was more applicable to the US and its allies, than to China. The Pentagon and associated think-tanks have repeatedly sketched out plans for an air-sea battle directed against China. Cutting off Chinese access to shipping lanes in the Pacific would play a key role in such a scenario, starving the Chinese mainland, as it was subjected to a US bombardment.

The Labor government is pressing ahead with this broader war offensive. It is currently hosting staffers from the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. They are reportedly discussing the details of Australia’s plans to acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. That military outlay is one component of AUKUS, a pact with the US and Britain, explicitly aimed at preparing for conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

Tomorrow, Wong and Albanese are visiting Indonesia. When AUKUS was announced last September, the Indonesian government publicly warned against it as the potential source of a regional arms race that would jeopardise south-east Asia’s status as a nuclear weapons-free zone.

Wong and Albanese will no doubt seek to batter down these concerns, as they continue to fulfill the marching orders they were given by the Biden administration at the Quad.



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