

Australian Labor PM visits Indonesia as part of US-backed regional blitz

Mike Head
7 June 2022

Less than two weeks since being sworn in as Australian prime minister, Anthony Albanese made a three-day trip to neighbouring Indonesia this week, continuing a frenetic series of regional visits by the new Labor government to back the escalating US confrontation with China.

Accompanied by a top-level ministerial delegation and a bevy of Australian big business leaders, Albanese made clear his mission had two major interconnected axes. The first was to step up Australian and US military ties with Indonesia. The second was to try to ramp up trade and investment in order to diversify away from Australian capitalism's ongoing dependence on mining exports to China.

At a joint media conference with Indonesian President Joko Widodo, Albanese pointedly concluded his remarks by declaring: "To finish, may I say, Mr President, that I was pleased we recognised our significant defence and security relationship and all this does to support regional security and stability."

Later, at a dinner gathering with the Australian corporate chiefs, Albanese told them that his government was "putting trade and investment at the heart of our regional and international agenda. We see Indonesia as central to our trade diversification plan."

Indonesia, with a huge population of nearly 280 million and a far-flung archipelago of 17,000 large and small islands across the southern flank of Southeast Asia and key Indo-Pacific shipping lanes, is strategically crucial in the intensifying offensive by the Biden administration against Beijing.

But President Joko Widodo's government, along with other Southeast Asian regimes, has increased economic links to China, the region's biggest economy, and refused to line up behind the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the accompanying stepped-up US provocations against China.

Last September, Widodo and other regional leaders voiced concern about the anti-China AUKUS military pact signed between the US, UK and Australian governments, featuring

the supply of long-range nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles to Australia. Widodo, in particular, warned that the AUKUS alliance—which the Albanese government fully backs—could trigger a regional arms race that militarises the Indo-Pacific.

That is why Indonesia was so high on Albanese's priority list. This was his second overseas journey during his first fortnight in office. Albanese's very first act in office had been to fly to Tokyo, just three hours after being sworn in, to join a Biden-led summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia directed against China.

At that gathering, as is becoming ever clearer, Biden effectively issued the new government with its marching orders: get cracking fast to combat the growing economic, diplomatic and strategic influence in Southeast Asia and the western Pacific of China, which Washington has designated as the chief threat to the hegemony that the US won through World War II.

As soon as Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong returned from the Quad summit, Wong was dispatched to Fiji to counter a South Pacific tour by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and thwart a proposed regional economic and security agreement with China. Days later, immediately after Albanese's ministry was appointed, Wong rushed back to the small Pacific island states of Samoa and Tonga to strike back against the bilateral economic and aid deals their governments had signed with China.

Last Sunday, Wong was on the plane again, as part of Albanese's delegation to Indonesia, which the Australian Broadcasting Corporation described as a "full-court press." It featured Trade Minister Don Farrell, Industry Minister Ed Husic and Luke Gosling, an ex-army officer and Labor MP who holds the parliamentary seat covering Australia's strategic northern city of Darwin.

They were joined by no less than 11 corporate chiefs, including Bluescope Steel boss Mark Vassella, Commonwealth Bank CEO Matt Comyn, Telstra CEO Andrew Penn, Fortescue Metals Group deputy chair Mark

Barnaba, Thales Australia CEO Chris Jenkins and Wesfarmers boss Rob Scott.

Also included were Business Council of Australia CEO Jennifer Westacott and chair Warwick Smith, Sun Cable CEO David Griffin, Monash University vice-chancellor Margaret Gardner and Austrade CEO Xavier Simonet.

The size and scale of this deputation is another indication of the entirely pro-business character of the Labor government, both domestically in suppressing workers' wage demands and externally in delivering whatever is required for Washington's war preparations against China.

The Albanese government's anti-China mission was reflected in the joint communiqué issued by Widodo and Albanese. It "highlighted the significant role of Indonesia and Australia's bilateral defence and security relationship including in supporting regional security and stability, as evidenced by the annual Australian and Indonesian Foreign and Defence Ministers Meeting (2+2) and plans to elevate our defence cooperation."

Nevertheless, there was no mention of China, or the Ukraine war, and Widodo struck a quite different note in his remarks. "Strategic competition in the region must be well managed to avoid open conflict," he warned. "The culture of peace and strategic trust needs to be strengthened continuously."

In an indication of the continuing tensions over the intensifying US and Australian moves against China, Albanese refused to disclose whether AUKUS was discussed one-on-one with Widodo.

An *Australian Financial Review* editorial noted with chagrin that Indonesia was still "seeking good relations with Beijing and keeping its distance from picking sides in a great power conflict." As a result, "Indonesia's preference for autonomy limits how hard Australia can press on China."

In an attempt to placate the Indonesian concerns, at least for now, Albanese said he would attend November's G20 summit in Bali, despite opposition raised in Washington, and other threatened boycotts, because of the possible presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Throughout the trip, Albanese also gave expression to the grasping aspirations of the Australian ruling class, which is always anxious to further exploit the natural resources and cheap labour of Indonesian workers, millions of whom live in poverty.

"My government will work with Australian super funds, among our largest investors, to explore investment opportunities here in Indonesia," Albanese said. "And the senior Australian CEOs who are here with me will be at the vanguard of a sustained campaign by Australian government and business to seize these opportunities."

In return, Albanese offered only pittance to try to

camouflage the predatory nature of Australian and US imperialism. He "reaffirmed" the delivery of 8.4 million COVID-19 vaccines, unveiled an increase to 5,000 per year, by 2025, of allocated places to Indonesians under Australia's Work and Holiday visa, and announced 10 "recover together, recover stronger" scholarships for Indonesian post-graduate students.

None of this will do anything to ease the impoverishment of the Indonesian working class or the ravages produced by the global pandemic. Since the US-orchestrated 1965–66 military coup in Indonesia, it has become one of the most unequal countries in the world, with 10 percent of the population living below the national poverty line and the richest four oligarchs holding more wealth than the poorest 100 million people. COVID-19 has so far infected more than 6 million people in Indonesia and killed over 157,000, yet these are vast underestimates because of the lack of testing and the frequent turning away of victims from overcrowded hospitals.

Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the *Australian*, pointed to the real discussions taking place within ruling circles in Washington and Canberra. "The shadow of China looms over the Prime Minister's visit to Indonesia, as it does over all regional diplomacy," he wrote.

Sheridan outlined some potential wartime scenarios. "Say it [Indonesia] decided to close its archipelagic waters to international trade heading for Australia. Say it decided to fully join Beijing strategically and offer it military bases."

Cynically, Sheridan added: "Paul Keating was right to say that the securing of peaceful development and political stability in Indonesia was a huge strategic gift for Australia."

In 1992, the then Labor Prime Minister Keating openly hailed the 1965–66 coup that installed General Suharto's junta, which spearheaded the mass murder of up to one million workers, peasants and political activists. "The coming to power of the New Order government was arguably the event of single greatest strategic benefit to Australia after the Second World War," Keating declared.

The Albanese government's US-backed mission to Indonesia is taking this dirty history of Labor and Australian imperialism to a new level, directly aligning behind Washington's preparations for a potential nuclear war against China that would have devastating consequences across the region.



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