

Former Australian defence minister reveals plans for fast-tracked purchase of US nuclear-powered submarines

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Preparations for a frontline role in a catastrophic US-led war against China are intensifying within Australia's military and political ruling circles under the recently-installed Labor government.

That is clear from yesterday's extraordinary public declaration—on the front page of the Murdoch media's *Australian* newspaper—by Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton, who was defence minister until three weeks ago.

No doubt with the approval of Washington's strategic elite, Dutton disclosed that before the May 21 election the Australian defence department was working with US officials on a plan to purchase two Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines from the US by 2030.

That is at least a decade before the scheduled arrival of such long-range attack stealth submarines if they were built in Australia, as initially announced to the public when the AUKUS military alliance between the US, UK and Australia against China was signed last September.

“This wouldn't mean waiting until 2038 for the first submarine to be built here in Australia,” Dutton wrote in an op-ed column for the newspaper, which was then splashed over the front page. “We would have our first two subs this decade. I had formed a judgment the Americans would have facilitated exactly that.”

This “judgment” was clearly based on discussions at the highest level in Washington, as Dutton initially foreshadowed soon after the AUKUS pact was unveiled.

Highlighting Dutton's op-ed, the *Australian* reported: “It's understood preliminary discussions on the option were held with the US government, which would also have to supply submariners to serve on the vessels to train Australian personnel.”

Dutton's intervention was clearly aimed at ensuring that the plans for a rapid acquisition of the nuclear-powered

subs proceed apace under the Labor government.

His comments were in line with a clamor in the Murdoch press, reflecting the dictates of the US and Australian military-intelligence establishments, for Australia to immediately acquire a vast arsenal of offensive weaponry.

Even more significant was the Labor government's response. Defence Minister Richard Marles again sought to demonstrate that the Albanese government was more committed to the US military alliance than its Coalition predecessor. He accused Dutton of “damaging the national interest” and “undermining AUKUS” by going public about the behind-the-scenes machinations.

Marles' statements expressed thinly-veiled consternation that the plans had been let known to the public. Above all, “national security” and the “national interest” mean secrecy. The Australian military build-up, aimed at preparing war with China, has largely proceeded behind the backs of working people, because of the mass opposition that exists to militarism and war.

Two days earlier, Marles had told the *Australian* that plugging the anticipated “submarine capability gap” was his most urgent priority. He said the Albanese government was “completely committed to doing what is required” to deliver the nuclear submarines.

Marles said the subs were “fundamental” to the nation's security, vowing to provide the necessary funding to “make this work.” That means driving up military spending way above the \$600 billion already committed over the current decade.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a pro-US government-backed think tank, estimates that the US vessels could cost up to twice the \$90 billion for French submarines, whose contract was cancelled as part of the AUKUS agreement. Extra regulatory and infrastructure

costs would potentially add tens more billions of dollars to the bill.

Marles openly identified China as the target. He said China's "assertiveness" under President Xi Jinping presented "very real, very present" security challenges for Australia. The Labor government would address those challenges "by getting the hard power equation right"—something he said the previous Coalition government had failed to do. "This is much less about chest beating than making sure you do the work to build our capability."

In his *Australian* op-ed, Dutton also sought to whip up an anti-Chinese scare campaign, as both he and the Labor leaders have done repeatedly.

Dutton wrote: "As the Chinese fighter jet incident has demonstrated in recent days, we are living in uncertain and dangerous times. We should continue to encourage the Americans to base some of their Virginia-class subs here in our waters. I believe this is achievable and should be pursued vigorously."

As the WSWS has pointed out, this dubious "incident"—allegedly involving a Chinese "intercept" of an Australian spy plane near the Chinese-claimed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea—is part of an escalating series of provocative flights by US, Canadian and Australian war planes over sensitive sites close to Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas.

Dutton gave another indication of the US orchestration of this drive to forge an anti-China alliance and goad Beijing into military reactions that could provide the pretext for war. "The Americans—like the UK, India, Japan and many others who are reading the intelligence—understand the threat environment in which we live in the Indo-Pacific," he wrote.

Among other things, Dutton divulged the hardly unexpected decision to acquire submarines from the US, rather than the UK. One reason he offered for acquiring US Virginia-class submarines was that they were "capable of launching missiles vertically."

In an effort to placate the British government, he proposed buying "more Hunter-class frigates or other British made hardware to 'honour and respect' the UK's role in the AUKUS partnership."

Ramping-up the war drum-beating, Dutton also raised an alarm about the supposed vulnerability of Australia's existing submarines.

"Why do we need a fleet of nuclear subs? We need the nuclear technology because the advice from our experts was clear: diesel-electric submarines would not be able to

compete against the Chinese in the South China Sea beyond 2035. The diesel-electric submarine needs to come to the surface to 'snort'—recharge her batteries—and would be detected by emerging radar technologies."

That concern underscores the real purpose of the nuclear-powered subs—to lurk beneath the waters off the Chinese coast, from where they can launch missiles.

In their first two weeks in office, Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong have engaged in a frenetic series of missions on Washington's behalf—to the anti-China Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit in Tokyo, the Pacific Islands and Indonesia—to prove Labor's readiness to move fast against China.

Labor's determination to outdo the Coalition in aligning behind the Biden administration's escalating moves against China was a feature of its election pitch for Washington's support.

In April, Albanese told a media conference he was concerned about "government cuts to our important Defence Budget." That dovetailed with criticisms being made in key ruling circles about the supposed inadequacy of military preparedness.

In the same month, US President Joe Biden, the then Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the AUKUS treaty would be extended to include the development of hypersonic long-range missiles and electronic warfare technologies.

Now in office, Labor has already committed itself to vastly increase the military build-up. That means deeper cuts to public health, education, housing and other essential social programs, even as spiralling inflation, rising interest rates and falling real wages produce a cost of living crisis for millions of working-class households.



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