

Australian deputy PM travels to Japan to help ratchet up conflict with China

Mike Head
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After attending last weekend's Shangri-la security forum in Singapore—where he backed the US government in escalating its accusations and threats against China—Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles flew straight to Japan to strengthen the US-led military buildup for war.

Even on his way, Marles issued further provocative statements, describing Australia's military ties with Japan as essential for confronting China and vowing to continue Australia's intrusive military operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, in defiance of Chinese warnings of the danger of war over Taiwan.

Speaking on behalf of the recently-elected Labor government, Marles told "Today," an Australian national television program, there were few more important allies than Japan for Australia. "China is seeking to shape the world around it in a way that it has not done before," he declared.

Significantly, Marles said Australian ships and submarines would continue to sail through the narrow Taiwan Strait between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, where US and allied warships have conducted increasing operations, provoking a Beijing warning against such voyages.

At the Shangri-la gathering, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin delivered an incendiary speech accusing China of "aggression" and "coercion" in the Indo-Pacific region. Austin specifically pinpointed Taiwan, which is internationally recognised as part of China, as a flashpoint. "The stakes are especially stark in the Taiwan Strait," Austin said.

In response, Beijing reiterated its stance that the strait does not consist of international waters. "It is a false claim when certain countries call the Taiwan Strait 'international waters' in order to find pretext for manipulating issues related to Taiwan and threatening China's sovereignty and security," a foreign ministry spokesman said on Monday night.

Equally aggressively, Marles said Australian warplanes would continue to fly over the South China Sea and near the

disputed Paracel Islands, despite a still-murky near-miss with a Chinese jet last month. "We're not going to be deterred from doing that in the future," he said. "It obviously directly goes to our national security. Most of our traffic traverses that body of water."

Marles said he wanted to take the alliance with Japan to "the next level" and would push for more joint military exercises after the two countries signed a reciprocal access agreement in January. That pact, which allows for the two countries' militaries to step up shared training and host each other's forces, could see Australian units stationed in Japan, very close to China.

The intensifying relationship between Australia and Japan—which occupied China during the 1930s—has triggered a reaction from Beijing. China's foreign ministry has accused Japan, along with Australia and the US, of smearing its human rights record while "baselessly" building up its military in response to a perceived Chinese threat.

Nevertheless, Marles was belligerent. Interviewed by Bloomberg television, he was asked: "China's defence minister has warned that if we do see any attempt from Taiwan to split, there will be no choice but then to fight at any cost. In that scenario, would you see Australia go to war to defend Taiwan?"

Marles replied: "Well, look, I'm not going to get into hypotheticals." By refusing to rule out Australian military intervention, he effectively lined up behind US President Joe Biden who has three times vowed to "defend" Taiwan if China moved to forcibly reunite the island with the mainland.

Marles was then asked: "Are you worried about a World War III?" His extraordinary answer was: "I'm not worried about a World War III. I'm not going to speculate on that. What we're about is trying to build regional security, regional stability, and that's about placing a preeminence on the rules-based order that was put in place after the Second World War."

This further underscores the readiness of the US and its closest allies to prod China into a military clash that could

trigger a catastrophic world war involving nuclear weapons. Marles, echoing Washington, couched his response in terms of “stability” and upholding the “rules-based order” established after World War II. But that “order” was based on the hegemony that US imperialism asserted after defeating Japan in 1945.

Marles also defended the Japanese government’s provocative statements during the Shangri-la event that the Russian invasion of Ukraine could set a precedent for a Chinese takeover of Taiwan. He was asked how worried he was about “instability, about potential war in this region,” after Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the Ukraine of today could be the East Asia of tomorrow.

Marles again reprised the US line, saying Kishida was making the point that the “rules-based order is important everywhere and what we’re seeing in Ukraine is a challenge to the rules-based order.”

The truth is that the US and its allies goaded Russia into the reactionary invasion of Ukraine by orchestrating a 2014 coup in Ukraine to install a fascist-backed government, expanding the nuclear-armed NATO military alliance to Russia’s borders and conducting aggressive military exercises in the Black Sea region.

Japan’s statements on Taiwan are doubly inflammatory because Tokyo brutally occupied the island for 50 years, until 1945, after defeating China in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95.

Yesterday, Marles told Hirokazu Matsuno, chief cabinet secretary, that Australia felt “empowered sitting at a table with Japan.”

On June 7, Kishida’s government announced it would double Japan’s military budget, making it the third largest military spender in the world, surpassed by only the US and China. That is a dramatic further move away from Japan’s post-World War II pacifist constitution.

Marles’ trip to Singapore and Tokyo is the latest in a frenzied series of missions by the Labor government in just three weeks, including attendance at the US-Japan-India-Australia “Quad” summit in Japan, and trips to the Pacific islands and Indonesia, in order to back the Biden administration’s escalating confrontation with China.

The rapid visit to Japan shatters the much-hyped claims being made by the Labor government and the Australian corporate media of a “thaw” in Australian relations with China because of a brief formal meeting between Marles and Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe on the sidelines of the Shangri-la forum.

Great efforts are being made in the Australian media to depict the meeting with Wei as a breakthrough, even though he is not a cabinet minister, as part of an exercise to boost the Labor government’s PR image. There is also

nervousness in ruling circles over stepping up the offensive against China because it remains the biggest export market for Australian capitalism, led by iron ore and coal.

Before last weekend, no ministerial-level talks between the two sides had been held for several years, after the previous Liberal-National Coalition government took a series of punitive actions against China, such as banning Chinese investment in key industries, imposing “anti-dumping” restrictions on some Chinese imports and barring the telco supply company Huawei from bidding for 5G contracts.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese further laid bare the “thaw” myth yesterday, insisting that while dialogue was “always a good thing,” there would be no improvement in the relationship until and unless China ended its alleged “sanctions” on some Australian agricultural imports. “It’s China that needs to remove those sanctions,” he declared, adhering to the pro-US line adopted by the previous Coalition government.

For its part, Beijing said the Wei-Marles meeting was fraught. The *National Defence Times*, a newspaper run by the People’s Liberation Army, said Marles’s tone at the meeting was “quite heavy,” telling Wei that Australia was “shocked” by China’s military expansion. The newspaper also said the change of government in Australia did not mean Canberra would stop playing the “Sinophobic” card and would continue to be influenced by the US.

In a further sign of a ramping-up of the US-led conflict with China, five Australian navy ships will depart Australia over the next three weeks for deployments throughout the Indo-Pacific region, including Exercise Rim of the Pacific 2022 around the Hawaiian islands.

Far from offering a “reset” of Australian foreign policy, the Albanese Labor government is taking to “the next level” the Coalition government’s commitment to the US war machinations, placing the Australian working class even more on the frontline of a potentially disastrous global war.



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