Australian foreign minister continues US-instigated anti-China campaign in Southeast Asia

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Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong last week visited Vietnam and Malaysia. The trip was the latest in a whirlwind series of foreign engagements since the Labor government barely scraped into office in the May 21 federal election.

As with previous repeated trips by Wong to the Pacific Islands and Indonesia, her visit to Southeast Asia was couched in terms of "regional engagement" and "friendship." Much was made in the media of Wong's return to Sabah in Malaysia, where she was born.

All of this was a diversion. In reality, Wong is continuing on a mission laid out by US President Joseph Biden at a meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in May. Held just days after the Australian election, Wong and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese attended it as their first act in office.

Biden reaffirmed the centrality of the confrontation with China to American imperialism's strategy for securing global hegemony. Australia's Labor government has been delegated the task of aggressively countering Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, and lining up states throughout the region behind the US campaign against Beijing.

Notably, Wong's tour coincided with Albanese's presence at last week's NATO summit in Madrid. There Albanese expressed his iron-clad support for a new NATO doctrine, which explicitly labels Russia and China as threats, extends NATO's focus to the Indo-Pacific and calls on member states to prepare for war against nuclear-armed powers. Albanese then visited Ukraine on Sunday, in a display of complete commitment for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

Wong's trip centred on the second prong of the war strategy of the Biden administration, its provocations and threats against China.

Whether coincidence or not, Wong arrived in Hanoi just days after a flare-up of tensions between Vietnam and China. Four days before her tour began, Vietnam issued a statement condemning China for conducting limited military drills in the Paracel Islands. The rocky outcrop in the South China Sea is claimed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan.

The Vietnamese statement had branded the Chinese military actions as a violation of its sovereignty, despite the fact that the dispute over the islands has never been resolved. Over recent months, there have also been diplomatic clashes over fishing rights in the vicinity of the Paracels.

In her main address, delivered at the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Wong essentially echoed the Vietnamese statement, though without explicitly mentioning China. "Our two countries share an interest in a region that is peaceful, prosperous, that is stable, in which sovereignty is respected," she declared. "A region where disputes are settled peacefully in accordance with international law and norms, not by size and power."

The remarks turn reality on their head. Beginning with the Obama administration, the US has deliberately inflamed regional disputes in the South China Sea that had simmered at low levels for decades.

The US elevated the sea to centre stage in order to instigate conflict between China and neighbouring countries and create flashpoints for military provocations that threaten outright conflict. This has included repeated US "freedom of navigation"

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operations, in or near waters claimed by China.

Last month, Beijing revealed that Australian, Canadian and US military planes had been conducting dangerous flights near Chinese military forces in both the South and East China Seas. These had resulted in several near misses, which were falsely represented by Canada and Australia as instances of Chinese aggression.

Wong's remarks underscore the hypocrisy at the centre of the US-led invocations of sovereignty and "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. While frequently accusing China of violating the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the US has refused to sign the convention. Wong's comments about "norms" and "laws" were essentially a reference to the dictates of Washington.

While in Hanoi, Wong foreshadowed expanded military and security cooperation between Australia and Vietnam. She opened the "Vietnam Australia Centre," which will train young political leaders in the country. In addition to the geo-strategic calculations, Vietnam is viewed by Australian imperialism as a major commercial opportunity. Trade between the two nations reached $9 billion over the first five months of the year, a more than 50 percent rise from the corresponding period in 2021. The country is a key provider of super-exploited, sweatshop labour.

The real issues underlying the Labor government's intensive focus on Indo-Pacific states came to the fore during Wong's trip to Malaysia. That country's Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah told the media he had a "very candid" discussion with Wong. Asked whether his government had changed its views on the AUKUS military alliance, Abdullah said Malaysia's previous position remained.

Together with Indonesia, Malaysia voiced concerns last September, when Australia, Britain and the US announced the new pact, which is explicitly aimed at preparing for military conflict in the region. Both Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta warned that the AUKUS partnership risked a major militarisation of the region and an end to its nominal status as a nuclear-free zone.

Under AUKUS, Australia is acquiring a fleet of nuclear-armed submarines, along with hypersonic missiles and other offensive capabilities. In the corporate press, it is openly discussed that these are to be directed against China.

Asked about the Malaysian objection, Wong said she had welcomed the opportunity "to explain how we see AUKUS to [Malaysia] and to other counterparts in the visits I have made prior to this visit, which are obviously to Vietnam and to Jakarta."

In other words, the issue has been raised by each of the Southeast Asian nations Wong has visited. All of them fear being embroiled in a major military build-up that risks catastrophe. Wong, functioning as an emissary of the Biden administration, is seeking to quell the concerns and bring the regional states into line with the confrontation against China.

Her answers to the press on AUKUS were incredibly thin. The Labor government would "engage respectfully" and "listen to the concerns" of countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, while it pressed ahead with AUKUS.

Wong claimed that Australia remained committed to being a non-nuclear power. Senior political figures, however, including former Prime Minister John Howard, have openly admitted that the acquisition and maintenance of nuclear-powered submarines will require the development of a domestic nuclear industry.

Also notable during Wong's trip was a silence on the Ukraine conflict, despite the Labor government's commitment to the US-NATO proxy war with Russia.

Malaysia and Indonesia have both rejected calls to impose sanctions on Russia, with which they maintain important trade ties. While Wong was in Southeast Asia, Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited Ukraine and Russia, where he held a meeting with President Vladimir Putin and stood alongside him for a joint press conference.

Wong undoubtedly raised the need for Asian states to line up behind the conflict with Russia during her visits to Vietnam and Malaysia. That the issue was not mentioned publicly indicates that this call was declined.

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