

AUSMIN talks expand Australia's role in US war preparations against China

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Talks between top Australian and US defence and foreign policy leaders concluded in Washington yesterday with the issuing of a joint statement outlining a further militarisation of the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war against China.

The Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) were attended by Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles. They spoke with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin. These were the first AUSMIN talks since a Labor government was elected in Australia in May.

This morning, the first round of meetings were held of the AUKUS military pact, involving the US, Australia and Britain. Austin proclaimed the stepped-up alliance, unveiled last September, as an “historic endeavour.” He pledged that the US would ensure that Australia acquired nuclear-powered submarines, “at the earliest possible date.” Under AUKUS, hypersonic missiles are also to be based in Australia.

The meeting was the capstone of a trip to Washington focussed entirely on an aggressive military build-up. For more than a decade, the AUSMIN talks have been a focal point of US and Australian plotting against China.

In talks over the past four years, the issue of expanded US basing arrangements was central. The US already has a “rotation” of 2,500 marines in the northern Australian city of Darwin, first agreed under the last federal Labor government as it signed up to Washington’s “pivot to Asia” in 2011. US naval vessels and aircraft routinely “stop over” at Australian bases, especially in the north and north-west of the country.

Joint war games have intensified. Reports of “near misses” between Australian and Chinese naval and airforce assets in the South and East China Seas over recent months have revealed continuous military activities in the region, which are shrouded in secrecy.

The latest AUSMIN talks mark an intensification of these processes. The statement is deliberately vague with few details provided. The meaning, however, is clear. Large swathes of Australia are to be transformed into a staging base for the US-led preparations for a disastrous war with China.

The statement declares that the two countries “decided to formalize the Enhanced Force Posture Cooperation announced in 2021.” The “existing initiatives that were announced in

2011,” such as the de facto marine base, are to be augmented by “Enhanced Land Cooperation, Enhanced Maritime Cooperation, and the Combined Logistics, Sustainment, and Maintenance Enterprise.”

The leaders agreed to “continue the rotational presence of US capabilities in Australia, across air, land, and maritime domains. This would include US Bomber Task Force rotations, fighters, and future rotations of US Navy and US Army capabilities.”

They resolved to “identify priority locations in Australia to support enhanced US force posture with associated infrastructure, including runway improvements, parking aprons, fuel infrastructure, explosive ordnance storage infrastructure, and facilities to support the workforce.”

The document states that new sites will be developed in Australia for “rotations” of the US airforce, army and marine corps.

The term “rotation” is double speak. It is used simply to avoid the more accurate descriptors, “basing” and “bases,” for fear that they will inflame the widespread anti-war sentiment that exists among workers and young people in Australia. The fraudulent character of the terminology is underscored by the fact that US marines have been “rotating” through Darwin in increasing numbers for more than a decade.

The document does not spell out the details of the basing arrangements, but their likely character is indicated by previous revelations.

Last month, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” program reported, for the first time, on advanced plans to station US B-52 bombers at the Tyndall Air Force Base in the Northern Territory. Preparations are already underway to expand runways and hangers to accommodate the aircraft. Massive fuel storage capabilities are being developed in the area.

The bombers are able to carry nuclear payloads. Given it is the US policy never to reveal which of its nuclear-capable assets are carrying such weapons at any given time, the decision to station the B-52 bombers at Tyndall effectively overturns Australia’s status as free of nuclear weapons. This momentous and potentially disastrous turn was taken without an announcement, much less any democratic mandate.

The references in the statement to US naval forces “rotating” through Australia points to the likely deployment of America’s nuclear submarines. The details of Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines have yet to be announced. If Australia is to manufacture the subs domestically, they will not be available for use until the 2040s, while the existing diesel-powered Collins Class submarines are in a deepening crisis.

Austin’s pledge also hints at a greater presence of US nuclear-powered submarines in Australia. It followed reports in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper last week favourably citing calls, including by the former US naval secretary, for Australian sailors to be integrated into the US nuclear submarine fleet, a portion of which would essentially be based in Australia.

Other media reports made clear that behind the scenes Marles and Wong would be discussing Australia’s own prospective fleet of submarines while in Washington. The possibilities include the acquisition of US or British submarines off the shelf, which would be ready far sooner than a domestically-manufactured fleet.

A government-commissioned review on the options is to be handed down in March. So too is a separate inquiry, called by Labor, into upgrading Australia’s military capabilities. Media coverage of the interim report, which was finalised this month but not publicly released, indicated it would include calls for missile systems to be placed in northern Australia and around key base assets, such as the US-operated Pine Gap spying and military coordination facility. Australia is also likely to acquire a fourth squadron of Joint Strike Fighter F-35s, which would take its number of advanced fighter jets to more than a hundred.

With the frenzied military acquisitions, the Australian Labor government and the Biden administration in the US are enacting longstanding plans for war. Under the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy, first set out in 2010, Australia is to play the role of a crucial “southern anchor.” It would impose naval blockades on key shipping lanes that China relies upon for most of its raw materials and would serve as a staging base for attacks on Chinese forces throughout the region.

An aspect of the discussion in US ruling circles is the need to diversify the presence of key US strike capabilities. The fear is that assets stationed in US bases in Guam, Japan and South Korea would be too vulnerable to Chinese strikes. One of the solutions is to “rotate” some of the key US strike capabilities in northern Australia.

Another crucial aspect of Australia’s position in the war plans is as political attack dog for Washington. This task has been taken up with relish by the Labor government, which has conducted a six-month diplomatic offensive, aimed at lining up states throughout the region behind the US-led confrontation with China.

The statement highlights the need to deepen relations in the Pacific, where Washington and Canberra have responded hysterically to an expansion of Chinese influence. South East

Asia is also singled out. Its governments have responded nervously to AUKUS, with some warning that it will set off a regional arms race. They have also been reluctant to back the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, for fear of its economic consequences.

In addition, the statement outlines a deepening of relations among Washington’s key allies. Japan will be “invited to increase its participation in Force Posture Initiatives in Australia.” Marles and Wong are headed straight from Washington to Tokyo. Japan, along with India, is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad alongside Australia and the US. The body is a de facto alliance of the region’s largest military powers, directed against China.

Over the years, the purpose of the military build-up has been spelt out more and more openly. In his remarks, Austin provocatively condemned “China’s dangerous and coercive actions throughout the Indo-Pacific.”

In the same vein, the statement hails the “rules-based order” in the region. It condemns purported attacks on democratic rights by China in its province of Xingjian and in Hong Kong, and hails Taiwan. Each of these trumped-up charges, repeated endlessly, is being used by the US and its allies to inflame relations with Beijing and create a casus belli for war with China.

The US war drive against China is an attempt to stave off its economic decline through the use of its military might. Australia, for its part, is seeking to shore-up its dominance in the Pacific, which it has oppressed for more than a century. These military preparations are being accelerated under conditions of a massive crisis of the global capitalist system and attempts by the governments to divert growing social tensions outwards.

There is widespread hostility to war among workers and young people in the US, Australia and internationally, alongside a major intensification of the class struggle. But to go forward, it requires political perspective and organisation. That is the purpose of the global anti-war webinar called by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality this weekend. Register here.



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