

Australia steps up anti-China campaign in the Pacific

Oscar Grenfell
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In the latest intervention into the Pacific since Labor took office after the May federal election, Foreign Minister Penny Wong last week led a delegation to Vanuatu, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Palau.

As with all of Wong's previous tours, the purpose of the trip was clear. Its aim was to advance a US-led campaign lining up Pacific Island states behind Washington's aggressive confrontation with China, which threatens a catastrophic war.

Since its election, Labor has taken particular responsibility for the Pacific prong of this strategy. It has continuously agitated against purported Chinese influence and issued not so veiled threats against small impoverished nations in the region about the consequences of any turn toward Beijing.

Notably, the delegation was bipartisan, with Labor inviting the Liberal-National opposition to participate.

Wong said this was to "demonstrate Australia's enduring commitment to strengthening our Pacific partnerships and addressing regional challenges." Her Coalition counterpart Simon Birmingham declared it showed that "Australia's engagement with our Pacific neighbours is of the highest priority and transcends domestic politics."

The timing of the visit was also of significance. It took place a week after Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles participated in annual Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN).

At those meetings the Australian Labor government and the Biden administration sketched out plans for a vast militarisation of northern Australia, directed against China. A meeting of AUKUS, a pact between the US, Britain and Australia, resolved to ensure that Australia acquired nuclear-powered submarines as rapidly as possible.

While the AUSMIN talks centred on the expansion of

US basing arrangements in Australia, four full paragraphs of the joint statement were on the Pacific. They pledged to "further develop" the "Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP)," an initiative unveiled in June through which the major imperialist powers aim to shore up their dominance over the Pacific. The participants are the US, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Japan.

The AUSMIN statement also pointed to an expansion of the US military presence in the region. This year, Washington has announced that the US Coast Guard will participate in a Pacific Maritime Security Program. The Peace Corps is also set to return to the region.

Following their participation in AUSMIN, Marles and Wong travelled to Tokyo, agreeing to far-reaching military cooperation between the two countries. The leaders' statement from that meeting also highlighted the PBP and the need for "continuing effective and practical cooperation in the Pacific."

In other words, the trip to the Pacific took place in the context of an intense and coordinated imperialist focus on the region. Wong's itinerary in the Pacific reflected this.

US and Australian linked think tanks have long warned of growing Chinese influence in Vanuatu. In 2018 and 2019, their analysts alleged that China was seeking to establish a naval base in the country, only to subsequently claim that Beijing had scuttled the plans due to their public exposures.

More recently, some of those analysts have stated that Vanuatu could be the next in line to "fall" to Chinese influence after the Solomon Islands. They have pointed to Vanuatu's high levels of debt to China.

The revelation of a security agreement between Beijing and the Solomon Islands in April touched off a wave of hysteria in Canberra and Washington.

Labor, then in opposition, strenuously denounced the Coalition government for having failed to block the deal. The US, together with Australia, issued thinly-veiled

threats of a military intervention if the Solomons agreement included provisions for the establishment of a Chinese base, something that the Solomon Islands' leaders and Beijing both denied.

Wong and Vanuatu's Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsaka signed a security pact. Underscoring the hypocrisy of the imperialist powers, the document is every bit as far-reaching as anything that Beijing had proposed, in the Solomon Islands or anywhere else in the region.

As a statement by Wong's office noted, the deal covers "a broad range of security cooperation areas including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; policing, law enforcement and justice; defence; border security, human security; environment and resource security; biosecurity; cyber security; maritime safety and security; and aviation safety and security."

Notably, the document foreshadows an expanded Australian military presence in Vanuatu. It states: "Where the Parties have mutually determined that a mutual security activity requires the presence of Australian Defence Force, Australian Federal Police or Australian Border Force personnel in Vanuatu, the Parties shall facilitate such a presence...."

If China were to enter into an agreement with a Pacific state, containing a similarly broad provision for the dispatch of military forces, the Labor government and the corporate media would be denouncing the threat of Chinese bases and a nascent takeover of the region.

Wong noted that unlike Beijing's agreement with the Solomons, the Australia-Vanuatu deal would be made public in full. This would show "transparency."

In reality, broad sections of the document are vague to the point of meaninglessness. Across the whole gamut of security activities, the first point in a number of sections is a determination to "enhance strategic engagement," a phrase that opens the door for almost anything. It provides vast scope for a range of aggressive activities directed against China, and no "transparency."

The other stops on the tour also served the US-strategic aims.

Palau, with a population of just 18,000, has long been one of the Pacific states that toes Washington's line. Immediately after meeting with Wong and her Coalition counterparts, its President Surangel Whipps Jr made a series of provocative comments directed against Beijing.

"The 23 million people that live in Taiwan need a voice," the leader of the tiny Pacific nation proclaimed. China had "played games with us... I don't think that's the way you treat true friendship and true partnership."

Whipps Jr asserted that the number of Chinese tourists to the nation had declined. This, he insinuated, was a political decision by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), over Palau's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. The tourism industry, however, has been in a global crisis for the past three years as a consequence of an unprecedented worldwide pandemic.

Palau is one of only 14 states globally that recognises Taiwan. These countries, all small US allies, are used as diplomatic attack dogs by Washington. Under the One China policy, the international community, including the US, has de facto recognised the CCP regime as the government of all China, including Taiwan.

As a key focal point of its anti-China campaign, however, successive US administrations have undermined the One China policy and boosted relations with Taipei. The aim is to goad the CCP into a war over control of Taiwan, which could be used as the pretext for direct US involvement in a war against China.

Earlier this year, Whipps Jr also played a prominent role in a US-backed campaign against a proposed region-wide Chinese agreement. He wrote to other Pacific leaders, urging them to scuttle the deal, which they did.

Wong and the delegation also stopped over in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Like Palau, it has long had close relations with Washington. After US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in a provocative military operation last August, however, the FSM issued a statement warning against an escalation of tensions.

Both Palau and the FSM have also been heavily involved in a series of murky disputes in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which brings together leaders from across the region. They, together with several other Micronesian states, have in the past threatened to withdraw from it altogether.

The motives and intrigues remain unclear. Washington, however, has signaled a desire to heighten the PIF's international profile, a point made in the AUSMIN statement and by Wong herself during the tour. The growing emphasis on the importance of the PIF follows an unprecedented White House meeting by Biden and his top officials with Pacific leaders in September.



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