

Australia purchasing sophisticated HIMARS and naval strike missiles

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The Australian Labor government announced yesterday that it had finalised agreements with the US government, along with arms manufacturers in that country and in Norway for purchases of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket (HIMARS) system and Naval Strike Missiles (NSMs).

Labor leaders openly touted the move as an unprecedented expansion of Australia's aggressive strike capabilities.

Speaking of the HIMARS, Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy boasted: "We'll have an Army ground-launched missile that can reach targets up to 300 kilometres away and we're part of developmental program in the United States called the Precision Strike Missile that'll allow the Army to hit targets in excess of 499 kilometres."

"This will give the Australian army a strike capability they've never had before," Conroy said.

In a particularly bellicose comment, Conroy noted: "HIMARS launchers have been successfully deployed by the Ukrainian military over recent months..." The provision of the American system to Ukraine has been one aspect of Washington's ratcheting up of the US-NATO proxy war in that country against Russia.

Only days before Labor's announcement, US-provided HIMARS were used by Ukrainian forces to carry out a deadly New Year's Eve strike on a makeshift Russian barracks. The missiles killed between 60 and 400 Russian soldiers, most of them young conscripts.

Labor's announcement appeared to be timed to coincide with the news of HIMARS deadly capabilities. Coming at the beginning of the year, the announcement of a new weapons acquisition was also intended to signal the government's intention to dramatically ramp up a protracted military build-up in 2023.

In fact, the HIMARS acquisition has been planned for over six months and is one prong of a far broader program aimed at boosting Australia's strike capabilities. This is a key component of the US-led drive to militarise the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for an aggressive war against China, aimed at ensuring American global hegemony.

Even the form of the announcement pointed to that agenda.

Conroy and the government have refused to indicate how much the missile systems will cost, only declaring that the price will be between \$1 and \$2 billion. That is purportedly to limit information about the weapons systems to "potential adversaries."

The acquisition includes 20 of the HIMARS, light rocket launchers that are transportable by truck and other means. An unspecified number of the NSMs are to be purchased. That system can carry a 120-kilogram warhead and strike land and sea targets at a range of 200 to 250 kilometres.

According to Wikipedia: "NSM is able to fly over and around landmasses, travel in sea skim mode, and then make random manoeuvres in the terminal phase, making it harder to stop by enemy countermeasures."

The NSMs are to be placed on the country's Hobart Class destroyers and Anzac Class frigates. They are clearly offensive weapons, aimed at preparing for aggressive naval operations. Repeatedly, over 2022, it emerged that Australian naval and air forces were participating alongside the US and its other allies in provocative voyages through the South and East China Seas. In several instances, those operations reportedly resulted in "near misses" with Chinese military forces.

The HIMARS, as well as other military developments, are being presented by the Labor government and much of the media as a "deterrence." In this narrative, the supposed purpose is to protect the northern advances of Australia, with hints of a possible attack or even invasion from China in the event of war.

In reality, there is no such prospect. Northern Australia is being rapidly militarised to play the role of a "southern anchor" for an aggressive US conflict with China, hosting essential strike capabilities that could be rapidly deployed and would be out of range of most Chinese missiles. Last year, it was revealed, for instance that Labor had agreed to the "rotation" of nuclear-capable US B-52 bombers through the Tindal air base in Australia's Northern Territory.

The exact purpose of the HIMARS remains opaque. At a range of 300 kilometres, stationed in northern Australia they

would be able to do little more than fire missiles into the country's empty coastal waters.

Several hints, however, have been provided. Conroy referenced the potential future ability of HIMARS missiles to travel beyond "499 kilometres." The number is unusually precise for a reason. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty between the US and Russia banned land-based missile systems from having a range greater than 500 kilometres.

The US, however, scuttled the treaty in 2019. In 2021, it announced a Precision Strike Missile (PrSM) program, which Australia immediately joined, pledging \$70 million of an initial \$907 million funding. Already in 2021, the Lockheed Martin produced PrSM had exceeded a range of 500 kilometres. Engineers are reportedly seeking to extend that to 1,000 kilometres or more.

The plan to acquire the HIMARS has been the subject of discussion in US-aligned pro-war think tanks, even before the previous Liberal-National government first signalled the purchase in May last year.

Several commentaries note, with approval, that the HIMARS is a transportable system. It can be moved around, not only on army trucks, but also by military planes. An extensive report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, in October, already foreshadowed the foreign deployment of the HIMARS.

It stated: "The Australian air and sea units at the Butterworth air base and Changi naval base in Singapore require ground protection. To provide that, the Army will need to position forces at each location to work with local forces. The ground force might include HIMARS batteries armed with anti-ship missiles as well as surface-to-air batteries mounting the Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS) anti-aircraft system. To safeguard the batteries and the bases from enemy attack, the deployed force will need both mobility and protection."

In other words, there is an active discussion in strategic circles about using the missile system, not only in northern Australia, but throughout the region, to strengthen the US-led confrontation with China.

The Labor government has been particularly active, since its election in May, in fighting against supposed Chinese influence in the Pacific and seeking to align the impoverished states there with the anti-China campaign. This included the signing of a defence agreement with Vanuatu last month, providing the Australian military with far-reaching access to that country. It is entirely conceivable that in the coming period, proposals will be raised for the deployment of HIMARS to Vanuatu and other Pacific states, to protect them against "Chinese aggression."

Another commentary, by Martin Davis in the *Australian*,

noted that with PrSM, the striking power of the HIMARS would be "well within the range of a short-range ballistic missile which is a type of capability Australia has never operated before."

He sketched out a scenario, under which: "The application of rapid long-range precision strike against land targets could eventually be matched by developing a maritime-strike variant of PrSM to enable the army to directly contribute to an Australian anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capability as part of an expeditionary operations concept that would see army able to contribute to traditional sea denial missions normally undertaken by the navy."

Despite the obscure military jargon, it is clear that Davis is talking about the aggressive naval deployment of the PrSM missiles, for operations throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Notably, the acquisition has also drawn the attention of the foreign press. The prestigious *Times* of London published an editorial, headlined: "The Time's View on Australia's HIMARS Deal: A Well-Armed Ally." It declared that the acquisition not only "reinforces the country's security, but means that it is well placed to thwart Chinese attempts to enforce its regional hegemony or launch a military attack on Taiwan."

The *Times* also hailed the agreement, as another indication that Australia has decisively aligned with the US war drive, notwithstanding its substantial trade ties with China.

The HIMARS announcement is just the first of many to follow over the coming months. In March, a Labor initiated review into defence capabilities will be finalised. An interim report reportedly called for a vast increase in Australia's missile capabilities, as well as the development of a new fleet of fighter jets. Under the AUKUS pact with the US and Britain, Australia is also acquiring nuclear-powered submarines and next-generation hypersonic missiles.



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