

France and Australia to make artillery shells for Ukrainian army

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The Australian and French governments have agreed to a deal to jointly manufacture and supply thousands of artillery shells to the Ukrainian army, the defence and foreign ministers of the two countries announced on Monday. The plan, unveiled at a “2+2” ministerial meeting in Paris, reportedly involves the Australian supply of explosives for the shells, to be made in France.

“Several thousand 155mm shells will be manufactured jointly” by French arms supplier Nexter, French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu said. His Australian counterpart and deputy prime minister Richard Marles said the plan would come with a “multi-million-dollar” price tag, but neither provided an actual figure.

The agreement marks a further significant stepping up of both governments’ involvement in the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, in line with the dangerous escalation by the US and Germany, marked by the deployment of advanced heavy tanks.

It came soon after the January 4 announcement by French President Emmanuel Macron that France would deliver AMX-10 RC light tanks to the Ukrainian military. That was the first dispatch of Western tanks, soon followed by Washington and Berlin.

It also came on the heels of the Australian Labor government sending 70 military personnel two weeks ago to join Operation Interflex, a UK-led mission that has already trained around 10,000 Ukrainian troops. That took Australia’s military contribution to at least \$655 million, including the supply of 90 Bushmaster armoured vehicles, making it one of the largest non-NATO contributors to the war.

Several types of artillery sent to Ukraine from the NATO powers fire 155mm shells, including French-made CAESAR truck-mounted guns, the British-built M777 howitzer and the German Panzerhaubitze 2000 self-propelled gun.

Marles declared that the ammunition supplies fit into

“the ongoing level of support both France and Australia are providing Ukraine to make sure Ukraine is able to stay in this conflict and... see it concluded on its own terms.” That language indicates an indefinite commitment, echoing similar aggressive statements from the Biden administration.

Lecornu said the aid would be “significant” and “an effort that will be kept up over time,” with the first deliveries slated for the first quarter of 2023, that is, within two months.

Such comments underscore the intent of the US-led powers to deliberately stoke and ramp up the war, using Ukraine as a battleground for a drive to defeat and dismember Russia, having goaded Putin’s oligarchic regime into a disastrous invasion.

Monday’s meeting was the first Australia-France Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations since the diplomatic rupture caused by the September 2021 AUKUS treaty between the US, UK and Australia. Australia dumped a \$90 billion contract to purchase French submarines in favour of a deal with the US and UK to supply nuclear-powered attack submarines.

The resumption of strategic and military ties between Australia and France, which has colonies and bases across the Indian and Pacific oceans, highlights the reality that the war against Russia is regarded by the US and all its imperialist allies as a prelude to one against China for control over the entire strategic and resource-rich Eurasian landmass.

By repairing relations with France, which began with a visit to Paris last July by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, the Labor government in Australia is assisting the Biden administration to strengthen a network of military alliances encircling China, while bolstering the interests of Australian and French capitalism in the region.

Marles said the signed agreement was the opening of

“new cooperation between the Australian and French defence industries.” He said the meeting also agreed to “grow and deepen the relationship between our two defence forces” and the two countries would have greater access to their respective defence facilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

As indicated by the joint statement issued by the four ministers, the two imperialist powers regard this collaboration as part of a wider alliance, focused on the Indo-Pacific, directed against China as well as Russia.

The statement declared that “France and Australia agreed to continue to work together” to “address shared security challenges” in the Indo-Pacific region. While not explicitly naming China as the target, the statement left no doubt about that. It employed all the catchphrases used by the US and its allies against China, including vowing to support “freedom of navigation” naval operations and overflights in Chinese-controlled areas of the South China Sea.

The statement effectively lined up behind Washington’s escalating steps to provoke China into a conflict over Taiwan by eroding the 50-year-old “One China” policy, whereby the Chinese government was in effect recognised as the legitimate government over all of China, including Taiwan.

While claiming to support the “status quo” and “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” the statement pledged to “support Taiwan’s meaningful participation in the work of international organisations” and “continue deepening relations with Taiwan in the economic, scientific, trade, technological and cultural fields.”

French imperialism, which once directly controlled a vast colonial empire, notably in Africa and Indochina, remains a major nuclear-armed power across the Indo-Pacific. It retains colonial rule over territories with about 1.65 million citizens and five permanent military bases manned by 7,000 personnel, from the Indian Ocean islands of Mayotte and Reunion, to the Pacific Ocean islands of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia.

During a visit to the region in 2018, Macron called for a new Indo-Pacific “axis” directed against China, signalling moves alongside other European imperialist powers, particularly the UK and Germany, to assert their own predatory interests in the region under conditions of rising Chinese influence and Washington’s aggressive moves against China.

Monday’s statement signalled a heightened involvement of French forces in allied military exercises

and operations in the region. “The ministers welcomed Australia’s increased involvement in the Croix du Sud multilateral exercise this April and Australia’s support for France’s first full participation in Exercise Talisman Sabre in 2023, following its participation as an observer member in 2021.”

Croix du Sud is a French military exercise held every two years in New Caledonia and surrounding waters. Talisman Sabre is a major US-Australian exercise, involving thousands of troops, held in Australia every second year since 2005.

In 2021, the French nuclear attack submarine *Émeraude*, along with the naval support ship *Seine*, conducted patrols in the South China Sea. That year, France also sent an amphibious assault ship, the *Tonnerre*, and the frigate *Surcouf* to pass through the disputed waters twice during its annual *Jeanne d’Arc* mission, and French SIGINT ship *Dupuy de Lôme* sailed through the Taiwan Strait.

This week, French naval sources said the country’s navy was working toward a Pacific Region deployment in 2025 for its Charles de Gaulle carrier strike group, which carries nuclear weapons.

Ever since taking office last May, the Australian Labor government has outdone its Liberal-National predecessor in placing the country on the frontline of US war plans, joining NATO and other US-led alliance summits, bullying Pacific island states into security pacts aimed against China and spending billions on new military hardware—at least \$4 billion in the first three weeks of 2023.

The visit to Paris by Marles and Foreign Minister Penny Wong was just the first part of a bigger mission. It centres on talks in London and Washington to seek to finalise the AUKUS arrangements for the far-greater Australian purchases of submarines, hypersonic missiles and other weaponry.



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