

Australian PM pushes economic nationalism to justify huge military build-up

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese used a featured address at the National Press Club yesterday to restate his complete commitment to AUKUS, a pact with the US and the UK aimed at preparing for war with China.

He used his speech to also pound the drumbeat of national unity. This was directed against popular anti-war sentiment, as well as fears that deepening social inequality will result in major class struggles.

Albanese delivered the speech after his Labor government received earlier this month its Defence Strategic Review (DSR) into the military's purported capability gaps. The review has not been released, even in a redacted form, and Albanese said that would not occur until close to the May budget.

But reports by journalists close to the national security establishment indicate that the DSR will recommend a vast expansion of a protracted military build-up that has already seen a bipartisan commitment of defence spending of \$578 billion this decade. The DSR is tipped to recommend the extensive acquisition of new missile systems, fighter jets, advanced drones and possibly warships.

That is entirely in line with declarations from US officials that they are preparing for a war with China, potentially over control of Taiwan, by 2025. The US, having provoked a war with Russia in Ukraine, is also carrying out continuous provocations against China. The conflict with Russia, aimed at weakening it militarily, and if possible breaking up the Russian Federation, is viewed in US strategic circles as a prelude to a full-blown war with China, which is viewed as the chief threat to US imperialist hegemony.

In his address, Albanese touted in general terms his government's support for a major expansion of the military. He stopped short, however, of providing any concrete details. Nor did he refer to the purpose of the build-up, except for vague references to a "time of profound geopolitical uncertainty, both in our region and around the world," and "threats to our security."

Albanese cited the foreword of the DSR, which proclaims: "Australia has a strong and deep Alliance with the United

States, a professional defence force and defence organisation, and an enviable international reputation as a capable country in military, peacekeeping and humanitarian and disaster relief."

Albanese stated: "[W]ith the right investments in our capability and our sovereignty, our defence force can be made ready for future challenges." He confirmed that the government would unveil next month its plan for the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, which are among the most critical craft for modern maritime warfare. This would "be the single biggest leap in our defence capability in our history."

Albanese declared: "AUKUS is about much more than nuclear submarines, or even technological inter-operability. AUKUS is about the future. It further formalises the common values and the shared interest that our three nations have in preserving peace and upholding the rules and institutions that secure our region and our world."

The speech's silence on the concrete implications of this project was undoubtedly the subject of intensive backroom discussions between Albanese and sections of the military-intelligence establishment. While pressing ahead with the war drive and militarisation, the Labor government and the political establishment are acutely aware that the vast majority of workers and young people are hostile to war.

As even critical defence analysts have recently noted, a war with China would be disastrous. It would result in mass immiseration, unprecedented battles, vast casualties and, if as is likely, nuclear weapons are involved, threaten the very future of humanity. That is why recent military acquisitions, including the purchase of HIMARS and naval strike missiles and ocean mines, have been made quietly and without fanfare.

It is also why Labor has not trumpeted its commitment to a vast expansion of US basing. America's nuclear-capable B-52 bombers are to be rotated, i.e., stationed through northern Australia, while US access to naval, air and army bases is being dramatically expanded.

In addition, under conditions of budget cuts and a cost-of-

living crisis, the defence expenditures will be enormous. Previous estimates have placed the cost of a fleet of eight nuclear-powered submarines at \$170 billion. Hypersonic missiles, which Australia is also slated to acquire under AUKUS, have a price tag of \$100 million each. Meanwhile, public hospitals, schools and basic infrastructure are in a state of breakdown.

To cover over this sharp contrast, Albanese sought to present the military expansion as the focus of a purported national economic rejuvenation. AUKUS and the new weapons systems would result, not only in Australian jobs, but a revival of Australian manufacturing.

A centrepiece, Albanese claimed, would be the \$15 billion National Reconstruction Fund. The sectors to be boosted, however, are largely specialised and will likely involve only a relatively small and highly-skilled workforce. Particular areas are advanced manufacturing, critical technologies, such as artificial intelligence and robotics, minerals processing and some energy and metals production.

Even on its own terms, the program will do little to restore the vast swathes of industry destroyed over the past 40 years, including the entire car manufacturing sector, most of steel production, textiles and much more. To the extent that jobs are created, moreover, they will be restricted to a highly-trained segment of the workforce, a small minority.

The proposal, however, is in line with a broader international tendency of “deglobalisation.” The US and other major powers are seeking to restore limited aspects of their industrial bases. The aim is not to improve wages or working conditions, which are under a continuous onslaught. Instead, it is to ready their nations for war.

This was alluded to by Albanese. He repeated the words of Defence Minister Richard Marles that “national security demands a whole-of-nation effort.”

This program recalls the analysis made by the Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky in “Nationalism and Economic Life.” Written in 1934, the article noted that all the major imperialist powers were “Back to the national hearth.” The attempt to rewind the clock on the international division of labour was profoundly reactionary and irrational from the standpoint of humanity’s economic development. It could only be understood as a preparation for war, with the nationally-based ruling elites gathering up their forces in anticipation of major state conflict.

The other side of this program is an intensified assault on the social conditions of the working class. In one of the only critical questions from the press corps after Albanese’s address, a journalist noted that the vast outlay on the military would have an impact on the national budget. Albanese responded by declaring that his government was committed to “restraint.”

There were supposedly many things Albanese wished the government could fund, but that would simply not be possible. In other words, the war program will be paid for by further cuts to the already crisis-ridden public healthcare and education systems, along with other vital social services.

The program of war is also incompatible with democratic rights. The night before Albanese’s address, Mike Burgess, the head of ASIO, Australia’s domestic spy agency, delivered his annual “threat assessment.” Burgess asserted that foreign spies were virtually everywhere. He claimed that ASIO had recently busted up a “hive” of such agents. Its caseload was greater than ever and it was engaged in continuous conflict with foreign intelligence services. Though Burgess did not directly reference China, it was clear where his accusations were directed.

Burgess presented not a shred of evidence. A years-long witch-hunt against supposed foreign interference, waged by the political and media establishment, has largely come up empty. Despite the bipartisan passage in 2018 of draconian laws against “foreign interference,” which is defined in the broadest possible terms, there has never been a successful prosecution.

Most ominously, Burgess complained that unnamed academics, business leaders and political figures had encouraged him and ASIO to tone down their campaign against purported “foreign interference,” for fear that it would inflame tensions with other powers. Burgess was scathing of such proposals.

At the National Press Club, Albanese backed ASIO to the hilt. He was asked: “What would your message be to those that are pushing back against ASIO?” He replied: “That ASIO is doing the right thing and that they have the support of my government in all of their actions.”

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