

Australian foreign minister defends commitment to US war plans against China

Mike Head
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In a convoluted and self-contradictory speech to Australia's National Press Club yesterday, Foreign Minister Penny Wong sought to answer opposition to the Labor government's intensifying involvement in the escalating US war drive against China.

While claiming that a “binary choice” did not have to be made in the deepening geo-strategic conflict between the US and China, Wong nailed the Albanese government's colours firmly to the mast of US imperialism. The United States, she declared, was an “indispensable power” in the Indo-Pacific and “our closest ally and principal strategic partner.”

Clearly conscious of mounting public alarm over a catastrophic US-triggered nuclear war with China, she ludicrously depicted the government's \$368 billion acquisition of AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines—designed to attack China—as an anti-war deterrent, provocatively accusing Beijing of aggression throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Wong declared, once again, that Australia had made its defining choice when the Curtin Labor government turned to reliance on the US during World War II. A “reality check” was needed, she insisted. There had been “no greater turning point in Australian history than Curtin's wartime turn to America.”

Even as she proposed a “balanced region,” Wong painted US imperialism as an essential source of the Indo-Pacific's supposed “long, uninterrupted period of stability and prosperity,” and denounced “any who take self-satisfied potshots at America's imperfections.”

Those unspecified “imperfections” presumably covered everything from the US invasion and half-century occupation of the Philippines from 1898, to the bloody US-backed military coup in Indonesia in 1965 and the murderous Vietnam War. That is not to speak of today's US military encirclement of, and economic sanctions against, Beijing or the Biden administration's effective junking of the 50-year-old “One China” policy in order to provoke a confrontation over Taiwan.

After painting US imperialism, which has dominated the

region since World War II, in the brightest possible colours, Wong regurgitated a litany of allegations against China. Without providing any evidence, she said they included “coercive trade measures,” “unsustainable lending,” “political interference,” “disinformation” and “reshaping international rules, standards and norms that have benefited smaller countries.”

Ignoring the massive and spiralling military spending of the US, as well as its allies in Europe and Japan, Wong depicted China as a threat to the entire world. She accused China of militarising “at a pace and scale not seen in the world for nearly a century.”

Wong and the government are obviously aware that the Biden administration is trying to goad China into a military conflict, as the US has done with Russia in Ukraine. She insisted on being “steadfast” in not speaking about the looming “regional flashpoints,” whether “the Himalayas, Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula or anywhere else.” She urged the media to likewise play down the likelihood of clashes, in effect to help keep the public in the dark.

While Wong claimed that the government's foreign policy seeks to “lower the heat on any potential conflict,” the content of her speech demonstrated otherwise.

In fact, Wong's remarks underscore the particular ideological and political services that the Labor government is seeking to provide to US imperialism and its junior partner, Australian imperialism. That includes combatting both the domestic and regional anti-war anxieties that have been fuelled by the AUKUS pact and the equally aggressive anti-China Quad alliance between the US, Japan, India and Australia.

The foreign minister opened her address by trying to drum up a new version of Australian nationalist identity. It is one that cynically links the government's pro-US foreign and security policy to the greater integration of elite indigenous leaders into the ruling class via the proposed referendum to entrench an advisory body, called the Voice, into the Australia constitution.

“Elevating First Nations perspectives will strengthen our

connections across the world and in our region, especially across the Blue Pacific,” Wong stated. She described the elevation of indigenous figures as “a powerful natural asset for building alignment” across the southwest Pacific, which the Australian capitalist class has long regarded as its sphere of influence and neo-colonial dominance.

Wong positively bragged about the frenetic non-stop ongoing barrage of visits she has made throughout the region, ever since taking office last May. She has essentially acted as a bully, battering down opposition to AUKUS and often insisting that governments break off any security and economic arrangements with China and align more closely with the US and Australia.

“In the eleven months since my appointment, I have visited 30 countries, five of them more than once,” she emphasised. “This week I will visit New Caledonia and Tuvalu, meaning I will have travelled to all Pacific Island Forum members as foreign minister.” Later, she added: “By the first anniversary of our Government, I will have visited every country in Southeast Asia as foreign minister, except Myanmar.”

Arrogantly, Wong depicted the impoverished small states of the Pacific, formerly British or Australian colonies, as part of “our family.” She portrayed her visits as liberating missions to free the region from alleged Chinese domineering. She went to assist countries that “don’t want to live in a closed, hierarchical region where the rules are dictated by a single major power to suit its own interests.”

Wong made the reality plainer by boasting of the “security” or “status of forces” basing agreements the government had prosecuted with Vanuatu, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. While claiming to be a messenger of peace, not war, she spoke aggressively of “shaping” the region in the interests of Australian imperialism. “We need to harness all elements of our national power to advance our interests,” she said.

Wong was clearly conscious of the opposition among workers and youth to the huge cost of the AUKUS buildup, which will inevitably mean slashing social spending. She said: “Some are concerned the price is too high.” She sought to counter that widespread sentiment by again accusing China of a rapid military build-up that had to be answered, and by invoking an image of great job creation in weapons industries, echoing Prime Minister Albanese’s chilling vision of a wartime economy.

In part, Wong’s speech was a response to ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating, who has criticised the AUKUS submarine deal and Wong’s performance as foreign minister, primarily from the standpoint of protecting the profit interests of Australian capitalism, for which China remains by far the largest export market, notably for iron

ore.

Without naming Keating, Wong directed a jibe at him and other establishment figures who have voiced nervousness about the prospect of a US war against China, in which Australia would be on the frontline because of its integration into the US military and its hosting of critical US bases, as well as its huge iron ore exports to China. “Now some imply we should attach ourselves to what they anticipate will be a hegemonic China,” Wong asserted.

Keating hit back immediately via an article in which he scathingly denounced her speech as one of “platitudes.” He wrote: “In facing the great challenge of our time, a super-state resident in continental Asia and an itinerant naval power seeking to maintain primacy—the foreign minister was unable to nominate a single piece of strategic statecraft by Australia that would attempt a solution for both powers.”

Ominously, Keating warned of another world war. “As a middle power, Australia is now straddling a strategic divide, a divide rapidly becoming every bit as rigid as that which obtained in Europe in 1914.” But Keating himself has a long record of backing US imperialist violence, such as the 1965 Indonesian coup, when it is in the interests of Australian capitalism. His call to “encourage both the United States and China to find common cause” is no more realistic than Wong’s posturing as a proponent of “balance.”

At the press club, Wong refused to answer a question from a journalist who said a Pacific diplomat had stated that Australian foreign policy was “basically an attempt to try and draw the veil over the reality, which is that we are completely locked in with America.” But her speech displayed exactly that, and this is a warning of the ruthlessness with which the Australian ruling class and its political servants pursue their predatory interests, and their readiness to plunge the population into a disastrous war to do so.



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