

Australian defence review outlines massive military build-up for war with China

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The Albanese government yesterday released a declassified version of its Defence Strategic Review. As it boasts, the review outlines the biggest shift in Australian military policy since World War II.

The document dispenses with previous doctrines, spanning decades, that the primary objective of the armed forces was centred on the protection of the relatively isolated Australian continent and its approaches.

The Australian military continued to conduct predatory operations, including in the South Pacific, and join criminal US-led wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. But the scope of its activities was limited by this remit.

Now, all that is gone. The review declares that the military's "objectives lie well beyond our borders" and must develop "impactful projection" across the Indo-Pacific. The review advocates "an enhanced long-range strike capability in all domains," requiring advanced missile systems for the army, air force and navy, as the spearhead of a far broader military build-up.

No longer will the different branches of the military operate in relative isolation from one another. Instead, they are to be conceived of as a single interoperable entity.

But the recommendations expand beyond the military. The review proclaims: "As a consequence of the risk that Australia now faces, our nation and its leaders must take a much more whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach to security." The phrases "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-nation" appear no less than 37 times in the 110-page document.

This really means placing the entire country on a war footing. Every aspect of society, from the universities to the schools, the media and the economy, must be directly subordinated to militarism and war.

The primary target is clear. The government and its advisors have sketched out nothing less than a plan for Australia to play a frontline role in a US-led war against China, which was named nine times in the document—an offensive that has been developing for more than a decade.

The document declares that the review was made

necessary by "the prospect of major conflict in the region that directly threatens our national interest." The Indo-Pacific had become the scene of "major power strategic competition, the intensity of which should be seen as the defining feature of our region and time."

While reemphasising the US alliance, the document bemoans the fact that "our Alliance partner, the United States, is no longer the unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific." It repeats Washington's claims that China is undertaking the largest military build-up of the past 80 years. This assertion flies in the face of an American military that dwarfs every other and has a vast number of bases in literally every corner of the globe.

The document similarly promotes fraudulent claims of Chinese "aggression," though often without directly naming China. This supposedly includes "economic coercion," as well as assertive operations in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

As with the claims of a massive Chinese military build-up, this inverts reality. The US, an imperialist power in decline, is seeking to ensure its global hegemony by aggressively confronting China, which is viewed as its chief economic rival.

To that end, the US has carried out a major military expansion throughout the Indo-Pacific. This has included the stationing of marines and other troops in regional countries, such as Australia, greater basing arrangements and the development of a web of military alliances aimed at encircling China.

The review declares, in semi-hysterical tones, that Australia faces the greatest "security threats" in almost a century. But it is incredibly vague on these threats. It admits that "there is at present only a remote possibility of any power contemplating an invasion of our continent," yet adds, "the threat of the use of military force or coercion against Australia does not require invasion."

The examples provided are a thin justification for such a sweeping military expansion. They include the prospect of greater cyber-warfare—for which advanced missile systems

would be of no use—and the danger of attacks “against our trade and supply routes.” As many have noted, China is Australia’s main trading partner. This is a nonsensical argument for deploying the military to protect Chinese trade, upon which Beijing is heavily dependent, from China itself.

The various contortions and obfuscations are aimed at covering up what is obvious. The review has nothing to do with defence against a foreign threat. Instead, it is a plan for offensive operations throughout the Indo-Pacific, directed toward participation in a US-led war against China.

That is clear from the review’s concrete recommendations. It lauds last month’s announcement by the Labor government that Australia will acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered US and UK submarines at a cost of \$368 billion over the next three decades. The AUKUS submarines are dubbed the “apex predators of the sea” because of their ability to conduct long-range operations and evade detection. They would be tasked with carrying out missions up to and inside Chinese coastal waters.

For each branch of the military, the emphasis is on longer-range strike capability. The review says the navy should shift toward a more agile fleet equipped with “enhanced long-range strike (maritime and land) and air defence capabilities.”

The army, as previously announced by the Labor government, is to receive new Precision Strike Missiles. These systems are being redesigned to have a strike capability of 1,000 kilometres or more, bringing them past the medium range threshold. The air force is to be provided with additional missile systems, as well as unmanned combat drones, which have been used heavily in the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Some media coverage has highlighted the fact that the review recommends a reduction in the number of new infantry armed vehicles from 450 to 129. This is presented as a “cost saving.”

But in reality, this is bound up with the changing mission of the defence force. No longer is the army being readied for land-based neo-colonial occupations of oppressed countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, its role will be in the Indo-Pacific war drive. To that end, the report calls for more amphibious vehicles and other technology for fighting in what is largely a maritime environment.

Great emphasis is placed on northern Australia. While this serves to further the narrative of a potential invasion from the north, that part of the continent is being transformed into a massive hub for US and allied strike capabilities. It is to serve as a launching pad for offensive operations throughout the region, including against the Chinese mainland.

The review calls for the expansion of bases in the north, as well as the development of a more complex system of

fuelling and logistics. Already, US B-52 bombers, which can carry nuclear weapons, are stationed there for part of the year. Under an AUSMIN agreement between the Labor government and the Biden administration late last year, US basing and stationing is to be expanded dramatically in every area, from marines to air force, army and navy.

Over and over again, the review emphasises the centrality of the US alliance. The report’s timelines are based on the warmongering statements of US military officials. It outlines urgent priorities that must be completed within three years, including an expansion of strike capabilities. That dovetails with declarations by top US commanders that the US will likely go to war with China over Taiwan by 2025.

The review calls, in general terms, for an expansion of military spending beyond the current level of roughly 2 percent of GDP. But it implausibly claims that the projects it outlines will not require a boost to the defence budget within the next four years. This is simply fanciful. What the review outlines will require hundreds of billions of dollars, meaning a stepped-up offensive against working-class jobs, wages, conditions and social services.

The fraudulent claims about spending are clearly connected to fears of popular opposition. The announcement of the nuclear-powered submarines last month provoked shock and anger among working people.

There is widespread anti-war sentiment. But to prevent the catastrophe that is being prepared, this opposition must be provided with a political perspective and concrete organisational form. That is the fight to build an international anti-war movement, uniting workers around the world in a common struggle against the source of conflict, the capitalist profit-system itself. That perspective will be elaborated at the global online rally to celebrate May Day 2023. It will be live-streamed at 5 a.m. (AEST) on Monday May 1. Register here.



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