

# Biden cancels trip to Australia for anti-China Quad meeting

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In a blow to the Australian Labor government and the US-led anti-China campaign throughout the Indo-Pacific region, it was announced on Wednesday that American President Joe Biden has cancelled a trip to Australia.

Biden was scheduled to participate in a meeting in Sydney next week of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad), which brings together the US, Australia, Japan and India in a de facto alliance directed against Beijing. He is still travelling to Japan for a G7 summit over the weekend. A stripped back sideline meeting of the Quad will be held there.

The reason given for the cancellation is that Biden must be in the US during the crisis associated with the debt ceiling. In its own way, that underscores the historic decline of American imperialism.

Even as it is conducting a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine and preparing for conflict with China, which is viewed as its chief economic threat, US capitalism is roiled by continuous domestic political and economic turmoil that threatens ever greater instability.

As the WWSW has explained, however, the debt ceiling crisis has a largely manufactured character. The issue of the ceiling has emerged every few years for decades. A solution is invariably found. The debt ceiling is being used to lay the foundations for a sweeping onslaught on social programs and the living conditions of American workers, in the interests of the corporations.

Biden's trip to Japan also shows that he is hardly chained to his White House desk amid the debt ceiling negotiations.

The cancellation was not revealed in a delicate, well-choreographed manner, but in a rather brutal fashion that dented Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's standing.

For weeks, Albanese and other senior Labor ministers had been touting the importance of the Quad meeting. It was to underscore Australia's increasingly central role in US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, and the Labor government's close relations with the Biden administration.

Last Tuesday night at 10:30 p.m., Albanese had announced with considerable fanfare that Biden would address a joint sitting of both houses of the Australian parliament during his visit. But then, the next morning, the entire trip was off.

It appears that major US publications, such as the *Times*, may have been informed of the cancellation before Albanese was. Australian outlets have since reported that Albanese received a phone call from a US functionary who told him the visit was cancelled before 5 a.m. on Wednesday morning. It seems unlikely that the information of the wake-up call was leaked to the press by Albanese or his team.

There are no doubt many reasons for Biden's cancellation. But the way in which it was conducted has the unmistakable air of a snub to the Labor government.

A hint as to some of the factors at play has been provided by coverage in the Australian press. The establishment outlets, deeply plugged into the US and Australian military-intelligence apparatus, have engaged in a great deal of hand-wringing.

The *Australian* published a revealing article by Peter Jennings, a senior fellow of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and its former executive director. ASPI is funded by the US and Australian governments, along with the major weapons manufacturers. It functions as the most hawkish mouthpiece of American imperialism in Australia.

Jennings noted the various factors underlying Biden's cancellation. These included the political crisis within the US, the need to manage domestic public opinion at such a time and the president's advanced age.

He also wrote that "The great pity about cancelling the Sydney visit is that the Australia-US relationship could hardly be in a better shape."

As Jennings noted, the Labor government, in office for just a year, has dramatically accelerated Australia's frontline role in the preparations for a US-led war against China. Albanese and other Labor ministers have engaged in what they describe as "activist diplomacy," aggressively pushing the US line throughout the region and demanding that other nations line up behind Washington's confrontation with China.

In March, Albanese stood alongside Biden and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in San Diego, as they announced a \$368 billion deal for Australia to acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. Dubbed as the "apex predators of the ocean," such submarines would conduct offensive operations throughout the Indo-Pacific directed against China.

That is only the centrepiece of a far-broader military build-up.

As outlined in Labor's Defence Strategic Review (DSR), released last month, the military will shift from nominal defence of the Australian continent to "impactful projection" throughout the region, in preparation for an armed conflict.

That is fully in line with the US war drive. But figures such as Jennings have persistently raised concerns that the Australian build-up is not proceeding rapidly enough, under conditions where some top US military officials are forecasting a likely conflict with China within the next three years.

Jennings asserted that those frustrations may have been a factor in Biden's cancellation. "After promising the biggest defence shake-up in decades, the government's mocked-up version of a public Defence Strategic Review delivered no new funding in the next four years, yet another review of the navy's surface fleet and a botched redesign of the army aimed at saving money rather than modernising the force."

"Australia's closest supporters in Washington will be mystified by this development," Jennings added.

Most notably, he wrote: "Washington is constantly assessing whether Australia is really up to the demands that AUKUS co-operation implies. Failing to back our defence rhetoric with funding will have been noted. That type of complacency garners no presidential visits when other priorities are pressing."

Similar insinuations have been made by other commentators, though generally in less explicit terms.

There is no question that the Labor government is being buffeted by powerful forces. It is fully aligned with the US war drive.

But at the same time, a minority wing of the ruling elite continues to voice opposition to AUKUS and the submarine program. This layer is not anti-war. Instead, it is fearful of the consequences of all-out war with the country's largest trading partner. Its representatives include some of the most prominent national politicians, such as former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating and leading Labor figure Bob Carr, a former federal foreign minister and the state premier of New South Wales for 10 years.

Previous reports have indicated that Keating's interventions, in particular, have been followed closely in Washington. The Albanese government has dismissed Keating's statements as "outdated," but has been unable to silence him or convincingly refute his contentions.

Of more concern is the genuine and widespread anti-war sentiment of ordinary people. The AUKUS submarine announcement, and its massive price tag, provoked substantial shock and anger. For more than a decade, the preparations for war had largely been carried out behind the backs of the population.

To try and suppress these sentiments, the Labor government fraudulently packaged its May budget as an exercise in cost of living relief. Those measures are dwarfed by the more than \$50 billion allocated to defence spending next year. But most of the

AUKUS-related funding has been deferred into the future, with the government effectively kicking the can down the road.

The plight of imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher and Australian citizen Julian Assange has also become more prominent. This has compelled Albanese to make highly conditional statements indicating that the government desires the Assange case to be "brought to a close." Biden is overseeing the attempted US extradition and prosecution of Assange for exposing American war crimes.

Given the country's geographical isolation and the centrality of the American alliance, visits by US presidents have always been major events in Australian political life.

Canceled visits have also had a significance. In 2010, then US President Barack Obama postponed a scheduled tour of Australia, before canceling it altogether.

The first postponement took place in March and another in June. By the end of that month, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had been ousted in a backroom coup. It took place overnight, behind the backs of the population and even sections of the Labor leadership. The ousting was carried out by Labor and union apparatchiks who were later exposed as confidential informants of the US embassy.

The WikiLeaks cables, which revealed their status, also showed that the US was intensely hostile to Rudd's call for Washington to try and reach a modus vivendi with China in the Indo-Pacific. This line was tepid and was not in any way anti-war, but cut across the US preparations for a full-blown confrontation with Beijing. Rudd had also expressed reservations about the Quad.

In 2011, following Julia Gillard's instalment as Prime Minister, Obama did visit, announcing the US pivot to Asia, an unprecedented military build-up, from the floor of the Australian parliament. Gillard signed on and announced the establishment of a US marine base in Darwin.

The US-instigated coup against Rudd is never discussed openly, but it no doubt plays on the minds of those walking the corridors of power, including Albanese, who was a cabinet minister in Rudd's government.

Albanese has done everything he can to prove that his government will not wobble, as Rudd's was perceived to have. But amid an increasingly feverish drive to war, his government and its performance on the military front is, as Jennings indicated, being continuously scrutinised in Washington.



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