

Australia a regional hub for US-led plans for war in the Indo-Pacific

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Developments over the past week have underscored Australia's transformation into a key hub for US-led preparations for an aggressive war against China.

Behind the backs of the population, the Labor government is currently presiding over massive war games rehearsing such a conflict; engaging in talks with top-level Biden administration officials to further integrate the armed forces of the two countries; and activating plans for the development of a war economy, in which broad swathes of economic life will be subordinated to the military machine.

The current centerpiece of a broad range of diplomatic and military activities in the country directed against China are the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), taking place today in Brisbane. Australian defence and foreign ministers Richard Marles and Penny Wong are cloistered in closed-room discussions with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

What has been revealed in the press thus far indicates that the Labor ministers are agreeing to an even greater militarisation of the country than has already occurred.

According to a detailed account in the *Australian*, AUSMIN will include a commitment from the Biden administration to assist in Australia's guided weapons manufacturing plan. Australia will manufacture missiles for the US, and stockpile them, in a bid to expand the military-industrial base of both countries and integrate them.

The turn to Australian missile production has a domestic component. A Defence Strategic Review, whose recommendations were accepted by the Labor government in April, called for a vast expansion of Australian strike capabilities, above all in missiles, so that the country could engage in "impactful projection" throughout the region.

While the details have yet to be released, interlinked US and Australian missile production also serves the aim of transforming Australia further into a "southern anchor" of aggressive US operations across the Indo-Pacific. The US is increasingly moving to station its most potent strike capabilities on the Australian continent, especially its north. There they would be out of range of some Chinese missiles and could be rapidly launched into the Indo-Pacific.

In little noted reports last October, it was revealed that the

Labor government had already agreed to allow US nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to "rotate" through northern Australia, being stationed there part of the year.

The *Australian* report indicates that a further expansion of US basing is under discussion. The article stated that the talks would likely include a commitment to "step up the rotations of US forces through Australia, and upgrade the nation's northern air bases for use by both countries." The second part of the sentence directly contradicts the pretense in the first that US assets are merely "rotating" through Australia. In reality, the northern bases are to function as joint assets of the US and Australian militaries, underscoring the fact that Australia will automatically be involved in any US war with China.

It has also been revealed that combatting purported Chinese influence and establishing US diplomatic and geo-strategic dominance over Southeast Asian and Pacific countries is a key item in the talks. A recently-announced police cooperation agreement between the tiny Pacific nation of the Solomon Islands and China is specifically mentioned in the *Australian* report as a focus of AUSMIN.

The Labor government has been at the forefront of a pushback against Beijing in the Pacific. Wong has toured the region repeatedly, hectoring and bullying its leaders to toe the US line. The Solomons are a particular focal point. When it was revealed in April last year that its government had signed a security agreement with Beijing, the US, together with Australia, responded with threats of a military intervention if the deal included any permanent basing of Chinese forces.

The offensive in the Pacific was demonstrated by Blinken and Austin's itinerary prior to their arrival in Australia. Blinken took the highly unusual step of visiting the Pacific nation of Tonga, where he opened a new US embassy building, emphasised America's commitment to the region and explicitly denounced China's purportedly "problematic" activities.

Austin travelled to Papua New Guinea. There he reportedly held discussions about greater US access to the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island. Papua New Guinea is particularly strategic, as far and away the largest Pacific nation by landmass and population. Unlike a number of other Pacific nations, it has the size to accommodate large US warships, and the Lombrum facility has been a focus of successive US administrations.

Blinken also visited New Zealand and held talks with its Prime Minister Chris Hipkins. While New Zealand is a US ally, persistent concerns have been raised that it is not sufficiently committed to the US confrontation with China, due to its dependence on trade with that country. Notably, Albanese separately visited New Zealand this week, indicating a coordinated, full-court press to more deeply align New Zealand with the war drive.

The focus on Pacific dominance is also key to the Talisman Sabre military exercises, which have been underway for a week with another week to run. Initially established as a joint US-Australian operation, Talisman Sabre is now a vast undertaking. There is a large contingent of German troops participating for the first time, in line with the push to expand NATO into the Indo-Pacific.

Soldiers from Japan and Taiwan, two crucial regional US allies, are present in force, as are a host of other Pacific and Southeast Asian nations which the US and Australia are trying to cajole more directly into their camp.

The operation includes a greater number of live-fire exercises than ever before. It involves some 31,000 soldiers, who are conducting activities over a broader expanse of the Australian continent than in any previous iteration of Talisman Sabre. The focal point is a mock invasion of the Australian territory of Norfolk Island in the Pacific, in a clear dress rehearsal of an actual military conflict with Chinese forces.

Various US military figures are obviously in the country for Talisman Sabre. But they are also participating in other activities.

Last Saturday, in a development that has received virtually no press coverage, the US commissioned a new littoral combat ship, the USS Canberra. The event in Sydney, Australia's largest city, was the first time in its entire history that the US navy has commissioned a ship abroad.

The event underscored the fact that Australia is overrun with US military officials and personnel.

Present at the event was US Navy Secretary Carlos del Toro. Del Toro, a fanatical anti-communist from the Miami Cuban emigre community, has previously described AUKUS, the militarist pact between the US, Australia and Britain as the vehicle for "defeating" China and communism "in every possible way," i.e., through war. Also in attendance was Admiral Michael Gilday, the chief of operations for the entire US navy.

Australian ambassador to the US and former prime minister Kevin Rudd took part, as did other prominent figures crucial to Australia's ever-deeper alignment with the American military build-up.

Caroline Kennedy, the US ambassador to Australia, has been continuously campaigning to promote the alliance after the announcement in March of a \$368 billion deal for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines provoked widespread anger.

Kennedy hailed the commissioning of the vessel, which will sail under the emblem of a star-spangled kangaroo. Speaking in strange, almost existential terms, "Our lives may be shaped by the historical forces of our time, but it is the connections we make to one another that define us and give our lives meaning. Now it is our turn to carry this alliance forward for our own children and grandchildren."

Similar statements have been made by Blinken and Austin. Such comments take the form of flattery of Australia's crucial role in US operations, not only in this region, but internationally.

But they also contain a veiled, or not so veiled threat. Any deviation from the alliance, and from the extensive military build-up that it requires will not be tolerated. The transformation of Australia into a vast base for war against China must be completed, not in the distant future but as an imminent necessity.

In the lead-up to the AUSMIN talks, Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of the *Australian* published several articles highly critical of the Albanese government. Sheridan, a figure with the closest ties to Washington and the military-intelligence establishment, has generally backed the Labor administration and has welcomed its commitment to AUKUS and to war.

However, in his articles last week, he sounded a different note. There was a growing danger, Sheridan warned, that the Labor government was all about photo opportunities and press releases. The central thrust of the Defence Strategic Review, of the need for a vast expansion of strike capabilities and of the military, had to be carried out in practice without delay. The major military acquisitions could not be kicked down the road, for fear of popular anger over the massive military spending that will be required.

The author was Sheridan, but there is little doubt that he was transmitting a message from Washington.



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