

Australia hosts Indian Ocean gathering to ramp up US-led confrontation with China

Mike Head
11 February 2024

The Australian Labor government's Foreign Minister Penny Wong was in the forefront of renewed aggressive allegations against China at an Indian government-sponsored gathering over the weekend in Perth, the capital of Western Australia.

Her remarks are another warning of how the massive populations of the Indo-Pacific are being drawn into the vortex of a potential catastrophic nuclear world war by the US and its allies against China to secure unchallenged domination over the region.

Wong accused Beijing of a "rapid military build-up" threatening the entire Indian Ocean. Her provocative offensive was joined by representatives of the major Indo-Pacific imperialist powers—the US, UK, France and Japan—as well as India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Notably, China and Pakistan, a regional rival of India, were excluded from the 7th "Indian Ocean Conference," an annual event that the Indian government inaugurated in Singapore in 2016. Those exclusions underscored the anti-China agenda, as did the fact that the Biden administration dispatched no less than three senior military-strategic officials to address the February 9-10 assembly.

They were Rear Admiral Eileen Laubacher, the senior director for South Asia at the White House's National Security Council, Jung Pak, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Richard Verma, a Deputy Secretary of State. All are involved in ratcheting up pressure on regional governments to line up behind the US against China.

In her opening speech, Wong set the tone, emphasizing the Albanese government's commitment to the US confrontation with China. In essence, she placed Australia on the frontline of the conflict in the Indian Ocean, as well as the Pacific. "The fact is that the same unprecedented threats that are faced on the Pacific Ocean side of the region are also faced on the Indian Ocean side," she declared.

Wong also outlined an intensified partnership with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in India, which is asserting its own predatory interests throughout the region

while being used by Washington to trigger conflicts with China. This partnership was "central to our efforts," she said.

Wong told the 400 or so delegates and observers from 32 countries that Indo-Pacific countries "face China's rapid military build-up without the transparency and reassurance that the region looks for from great powers." She charged Beijing with ratcheting up tensions and strategic uncertainty.

Wong directly linked this alleged threat to other "potential flashpoints in the region" that the US has accused China of creating "from the Taiwan Strait to the Malacca Strait, with its critical connection to the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal." She added that "disputes persist about land and maritime borders," referring to India's Himalayan border conflicts with China.

Further, Wong declared the need to protect "commercial and military passage through the Indian Ocean," which "hosts more than a third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of global oil shipments."

Labor's foreign minister insisted: "Any slowdown or interruption from piracy, disputes or disruptions, would have costly consequences around the world, as has been all too apparent recently in the Red Sea."

Her remarks thus suggested the Albanese government's readiness to participate in US-led attacks on shipping "disruptions" in the Indian Ocean. It is already participating in the US-UK strikes in Yemen on the Houthis who are trying to interrupt shipments to Israel as the Zionist regime steps up its genocide in Gaza.

Wong's charges against China flew in the face of the US-led aggression throughout the Indo-Pacific. Wong boasted of some of the military or strategic pacts that Washington has formed against China, including the AUKUS treaty with the UK and Australia and the Quad alliance with India, Japan and Australia. She listed growing Australian "security partnerships" with France, South Korea, Indonesia and New Zealand.

While cynically posing as a defender of peace and the smaller countries in the region, Wong gave thinly-veiled

voice to the neo-colonial interests of Australian imperialism across the Indian Ocean, where the Labor government is currently militarising facilities on its far-flung island outposts, such as Christmas Island and the Cocos and Keeling Islands.

“We will always remain a principled Indian Ocean power,” Wong stated. She declared that the Indian Ocean “is essential to Australia’s prosperity and our security.” She noted that the Labor government’s Defence Strategic Review last year identified this as “one of our primary areas of strategic interest.”

At a media conference, Wong pointedly referred to Perth as “Australia’s Indian Ocean capital.” That city is the site of the expansion of facilities for US nuclear-armed submarines and other warships as part of the AUKUS arrangements.

In essence, Wong echoed a US State Department “fact sheet” that was issued on the same day as her speech, February 9. It underscored the Biden administration’s identification of China as an existential threat to the US-dominated “international order” imposed after World War II.

“We have seen the PRC [Peoples Republic of China] become more repressive at home and more assertive abroad, undermining human rights and international law, and seeking to reshape the international order,” the State Department said. It boasted of reasserting “American leadership” and “an unprecedented level of cooperation with allies, partners, and friends across the region.”

What this “leadership” means in practice was indicated by the presence of Wickremesinghe, the sole head of state at the gathering. His heavily-indebted regime is under intense pressure from the US and its partners, whose support it needs to inflict brutal International Monetary Fund austerity measures on the working class in Sri Lanka.

Last month, Wickremesinghe announced a one-year ban on all foreign research ships docking at Sri Lankan ports, after the US and India objected to supposed Chinese dual use “spy ships” being allowed into Colombo and Hambantota ports.

In his speech, Wickremesinghe did not directly reference the research ship controversy but said “balancing between great powers [was] an increasingly complex task” for regional states, all of which have strong economic ties with China. The “space for manoeuvrability” was “shrinking fast.”

Laubacher, the US National Security Council envoy, bluntly told journalists at the conference that Sri Lanka’s ban was a “step in the right direction,” even as she paid lip service to the sovereignty of countries in the region. She bragged that the US had deepened its ties and engagements with many of them, some of which she recently visited,

including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Not too subtly, Laubacher also suggested that the US, Australia and India would share more “intelligence” with South Asian and Indian Ocean states about China’s military and strategic aims in the region. “Then they can make their own decisions in regard to their own security,” she said, like a mafia boss.

Representing the Modi government, Jaishankar likewise insisted that the Indian Ocean countries had to “pursue collective self-alliance or remain as vulnerable as in the past.” This was an unmistakable demand for greater alignment with India and the US against China. He accused China of violating agreements with India over their contested borders.

In her speech, Wong clearly lined up behind that US and Indian bullying, saying that in the current climate “even research vessels have the potential to be tools for strategic goals.” She parroted accusations that in Sri Lanka and across the Indo-Pacific, China had engaged in “disinformation, interference, opaque lending practices and coercive trade measures.”

Wong announced several programs to bolster US-aligned security and intelligence networks. These included a Marine and Coastal Resilience Hub under India’s “Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative” and a Civil Maritime Security Postgraduate program to train maritime officers.

Despite claiming to be “stabilising our relationship with China,” Wong stressed that this was without compromising “national security.” She said “we are investing in our own national power.” That was a reference to the Labor government’s rising military spending and its call for an “all-of-nation” war economy.

In other words, regardless of the huge short-term profit considerations involved in Australian commodity exports to China and widespread popular opposition to a disastrous war against China, the Albanese government is gearing up for such a war and demanding that all Indo-Pacific governments do the same.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact