

Australia pushes anti-China campaign at ASEAN summit

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A special summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia, marking fifty years of formal relations between the two, concluded in Melbourne on Wednesday with the issuing of two fairly bland statements calling for “peace and prosperity” in the Indo-Pacific region.

The documents were clearly a compromise, under conditions of sharp divisions, above all between some of the ASEAN states and the Australian Labor government, which hosted the gathering.

The summit again underscored the extent to which Labor is functioning as an attack dog of an aggressive US-led confrontation against China. A key component is to line up states throughout the region behind Washington’s war drive, under conditions of fears in the southeast Asian capitals over the consequences.

That was on display in the keynote address to the summit delivered by Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong. Her remarks combined banalities about a “shared region” and “shared future,” with a nod to concerns among some ASEAN states over the implications of escalating US-China tensions.

But the sting was in the tail, with the latter part of Wong’s speech a repetition of various US-inspired denunciations of Beijing, clearly aimed at ramping up the tensions, not lessening them. The presentation mirrored the rhetoric of the Biden administration itself. While deepening a web of aggressive alliances in the region against China, and continuing a major military build-up, Biden officials have paid lip service to the need for “guardrails” and “dialogue” with Beijing.

Having referenced the “conflicts” in Ukraine and Gaza, Wong ominously declared that the Indo-Pacific region’s “peaceful, stable and prosperous” “character” was also “under challenge.” She cited the remarks of Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr to the Australian parliament last week. He had stated: “Geopolitical polarities and strategic competitions threaten our hard-won peace, even as we remain beset by unresolved

inequities and inequalities within and amongst nations.”

Wong expanded on the point, leaving no doubt that her comments were directed against China. “We see claims and actions that are inconsistent with international law, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); the legal order for the seas and oceans,” Wong declared. “We face destabilising, provocative and coercive actions, including unsafe conduct at sea and in the air and militarisation of disputed features.”

Those comments were straight from the US playbook. Since 2011, when it began a “pivot to Asia,” entailing a major build-up against China, Washington has inflamed a series of territorial disputes in the South China Sea between Beijing and regional states, including the Philippines and Vietnam. It has transformed what had been differences simmering for decades into a potential flashpoint of war. A key element is the inflammatory accusation that Chinese development of reefs and other features in the Sea constitutes their “militarisation.”

Wong’s remark about “unsafe conduct” was not elaborated on, but appeared to reference murky incidents between US allies and Chinese forces in the region. That has included unexplained close encounters between Australian and other allied naval vessels with Chinese ships. While Washington and Canberra have used such incidents to condemn China as reckless, Beijing has repeatedly branded them as Western provocations.

That fits with a broader pattern of US-led “freedom of navigation” operations going back nearly a decade, in and near Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea. Wong’s citing of UNCLOS underscores the bogus and hypocritical character of such operations, given that the US has never signed the convention governing the laws of the sea.

Wong’s speech underscored the way in which the US and its allies are using the Philippines as an attack dog for provocations against China and pressure on other ASEAN states to toe the line. Wong not only cited Marcos. She also took the unusual step of personally acknowledging him at

the outset of her remarks, a courtesy she did not extend to any other leader.

Wong's remarks and those of Philippine Foreign Minister Enrique Manalo echoed each other. Manalo declared on Monday: "The shared stewardship of the seas and oceans in the region behooves us to unite in preserving the primacy of international law so we can ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes for all. It also calls for us to stand firmly together in opposing actions that contradict or are inconsistent with international law."

Marcos attended the summit and on Monday also gave an address to the Lowy Institute think tank in Melbourne that was even more explicit in its anti-China bent.

"It is unfortunate that despite the clarity provided by international law, provocative, unilateral and illegal actions continue to infringe upon our sovereignty, our sovereign rights and jurisdictions," Marcos said. Speaking the language of war, he proclaimed "We simply have no choice. We must defend the territory of the republic. That is a primordial duty of a leader. The territorial integrity of the Philippines cannot be threatened, and if threats are made, then we must defend against those threats."

Early last year, shortly into his tenure as president, Marcos announced with Biden officials a resumption of vast US basing arrangements in the Philippines, together with joint military exercises in the South China Sea. His administration has since carried out various provocations, presenting Chinese civilian fishing vessels as a military threat and stationing a growing number of troops in and near the disputed waters.

Wong referenced a Strategic Partnership between Australia and the Philippines. Signed last year, it provides for expanded military exercises and collaboration. She hailed a similar partnership between the Philippines and Vietnam. The day after the summit, on Thursday, Australia unveiled its own "enhanced strategic partnership" with Vietnam, which has also been locked in disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea, and has a history of military conflict with China.

The cultivation of the Philippines and Vietnam is ironic, given that the US push in the region is justified on the basis of bogus claims of a "rules-based order" and "democratic norms" to be defended against "autocratic China."

Vietnam is a one-party Stalinist state, which presides over brutal sweatshop conditions for many workers. In the Philippines, Marcos openly declares his presidency to be a continuation of the rule of his father, who imposed martial law in 1971 and oversaw a dictatorship until it was overthrown in the popular rebellion of 1986. Marcos is continuing the "war on drugs" launched by his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, which has included thousands of

extrajudicial killings.

Some of the obstacles to the US drive were also displayed at the summit. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim held a meeting with Prime Minister Albanese, and the two issued a statement.

But during their press conference, Anwar warned the Western powers that "if they have problems with China, they should not impose it upon us." He referenced Chinese trade as the most rapidly expanding of Malaysia's economic ties, and declared: "We do not want to be dictated by any force. So, once we remain to be an important friend to the United States or Europe and here in Australia, they should not preclude us from being friendly to one of our important neighbours, precisely China."

In a speech to the Australian National University in Canberra, Anwar went further, accusing the US and its allies of having placed obstacles "against China's economic and technological advancement" that "will only further accentuate such grievances." In Beijing's eyes, Anwar said, the aggressive US actions were "an attempt to deny their legitimate place in history."

Anwar also took aim at the hypocrisy of the US and its allies. "Unfortunately, the gut-wrenching tragedy that continues to unfold in the Gaza Strip has laid bare the self-serving nature of the much vaunted rules-based order," he said.

"The differing responses by the West to human suffering defy reasoning. Why, for example, has the West been so vociferous, vehement and unequivocal in the condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine while remaining utterly silent on the relentless bloodletting inflicted on innocent men, women and children of Gaza?"

Australia had pushed for the ASEAN summit to adopt a statement that denounced Beijing's actions in the South China Sea, but was stymied, leading to a bland call for "peace" and "security" in the region. The section on Gaza was also clearly a compromise, with a condemnation of attacks on civilians, but no explicit denunciation of the Israeli genocide.

Anwar and other bourgeois leaders in the region, beset by economic instability, social tensions and geopolitical competition, are attempting a desperate balancing act. But under conditions of a US-led war policy in every corner of the world, the room for such maneuvering is narrowing by the day.



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