

Australia's National Defence Strategy outlines plans for war with China

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An inaugural National Defence Strategy released by the federal Labor government on Thursday accelerates a major Australian military build-up and is more explicit than previous official statements that the purpose is to prepare for a US-led war against China. The document outlines a \$50 billion increase to defence spending over the decade, on top of already record military budgets, much of it directed to the acquisition of offensive weaponry.

The strategy paper is the first since the release in April last year of a Defence Strategic Review (DSR). Commissioned by Labor shortly after it assumed office in May 2022, the DSR called for an overhaul of the entire structure of defence to ready it for a major war in the Indo-Pacific. As part of this, the DSR, whose recommendations were accepted in full by the government, mandated the development of a biannual defence strategy, modeled on similar war planning conducted by the Pentagon.

The document begins by bluntly declaring: “The Defence Strategic Review identified a new strategic reality for Australia. It observed that, while conflict in the Indo-Pacific is not inevitable, Australia faces its most complex and challenging strategic environment since the Second World War.” Its entire thrust, however, is to prepare for such a conflict. This is framed in terms of “deterrence,” but Australia’s rapid military expansion, part of a US-led build-up throughout the region, clearly increases the likelihood of war.

The prospect of such a conflict is presented in terms of a broader growth of tensions and war globally. The strategy notes that the “optimism at the end of the Cold War has been replaced by the uncertainty and tensions.” That is a reference to the bogus claims that the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union had resulted in an “end of history,” ushering in a new epoch of capitalist development presided over by American imperialism.

Instead, the document points to flashpoints everywhere. That includes the war in Ukraine and what is described as “conflict in the Middle East.”

The strategy repeats Washington’s talking points, denouncing Russia’s “illegal” and “immoral invasion” of Ukraine. In reality, what is underway is a US-NATO proxy war, provoked and instigated by Washington and its allies.

Under conditions of US-backed Israeli aggression against Iran, the document features prominently a denunciation of Iran as a threat to “the global rules-based order.” Israel’s genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza, backed by the imperialist powers, including the Labor government, is not explicitly mentioned.

Turning to the Indo-Pacific, it states: “Increasing strategic competition between the US and China is a primary feature of Australia’s security environment and will likely have the greatest impact on the regional strategic balance. While it has global implications, this competition is sharpest and most consequential in the Indo-Pacific.”

Unlike in previous years, the document breaks diplomatic norms of issuing accusations, without naming the accused. Instead it openly claims that “China has employed coercive tactics” throughout the region. The strategy then lists the US litany of allegations against Beijing, including over its territorial disputes in the South China Sea and its activities in the Indo-Pacific.

In reality, these flashpoints have been deliberately inflamed by the US. China’s military activities have had a primarily defensive character. They have been a response to a vast US build-up initiated in 2011 with a “pivot to Asia,” and since accompanied by open declarations from Washington that it is targeting China because it is the chief threat to American capitalism’s geopolitical and economic global dominance.

Having pointed to “competition between the US and China” in the region, the document hails the fact that “The US is deepening its engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners and allies.” It presents the US alliance as the pillar of Australian foreign policy, and the framework within which all other relations are being developed. That includes the AUKUS military pact with the US and Britain, as well as regional and bilateral agreements with other US allies such as Japan.

In that context, the document codifies a new defence strategy, first pointed to in the DSR. It states: “National Defence is a coordinated, whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach to meet the strategic challenges Australia faces, including the threat of conflict and the prospect of coercion. It is much broader than the previous military strategic concept of Defence of Australia: it harnesses all arms of Australia’s

national power to establish a holistic, integrated and focused approach to protect our security and advance our Interests.”

The references to a “whole-of-nation” approach foreshadow the subordination of all aspects of society to the war drive. The document repeatedly references the need to align universities and sections of industry more directly with the needs of the military. It echoes previous statements by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese about the necessity of developing a war economy, including through “secure supply chains,” expanded domestic weapons production and select manufacturing.

The document states that the new doctrine will be achieved “by increasing the range and lethality” of all branches of defence, as well as its “interoperability,” i.e., integration with the US war machine.

Most of those capabilities that are outlined have been announced over the past year by the Labor government, particularly since the release of the DSR. They include an overhaul of the Navy, through the purchase of new warships, and a recalibration of the army, which will be oriented to preparing for “littoral” conflict in the Indo-Pacific. All branches of the military, it has already been announced, will be equipped with missiles, some of them medium-range which will eventually be capable of firing up to a thousand kilometres.

The north of the continent will continue to be militarised, including through the expansion of existing bases. The region is being transformed into a launching pad for offensive operations throughout the Indo-Pacific, including with expansions of runways and the development of fuel storage capabilities to enable US bombers, as well as American and Australia fighter jets, to be deployed from there.

The document touts AUKUS as the centrepiece of this expansion. That includes the plan for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US at the beginning of the next decade, and then to build further vessels in collaboration with the British. US and British nuclear-powered subs will establish a permanent basing arrangement in Western Australia, on the Indian Ocean, far sooner. While it will become operational in 2027, the document notes that US subs have already begun rotating through the Stirling Naval Base near Perth.

The strategy is presented as one of “denial,” with the argument being that adversaries will not take actions against US and Australian interests if they know they will be met with sufficient military force. Even within the document, however, the phony character of this line is clear, with operations and capabilities outlined that are of a plainly offensive character. They include, for instance:

“[A]mphibious capable combined-arms land system, enabled by Navy and Air Force combat capabilities and supported by Navy’s amphibious capability, to optimise the Army for littoral manoeuvre and control of strategic land positions...” And “maritime capabilities for sea denial and localised sea control operations that provide Defence with the ability to deny the use

of an area of the sea when needed and provide the ADF with freedom of action.” Both are in line with AirSea Battle plans outlined by the Pentagon, which in addition to strikes on the Chinese mainland, would centre on control of key shipping lanes upon which Beijing relies for vital supplies.

The increased funding for the military was described by Defence Minister Richard Marles as “the biggest commitment, in terms of increasing the defence budget over the forward estimates, in decades.” Some \$5.4 billion additional monies have been allocated in the next four years, on top of existing spending, which is already just above \$50 billion a year. That is to be followed by a \$45 billion increase over the last six years of the decade. Defence spending is forecast to reach \$100 billion, equivalent to 2.4 percent of national GDP, by 2034.

As in the US and globally, vast sums are being allocated to the war machine. Labor, during its two years’ in office, has imposed the cost-of-living crisis of the backs of working people, while enforcing “budget restraint” in key areas of social spending, including the crisis ridden public healthcare and education systems. The further increase to defence spending means that the austerity offensive against the working class will only intensify.

The response to the strategy has been mixed, with some media commentators close to the national security establishment issuing criticisms. This has included complaints that much of the additional funding is not in the forward estimates, and that many of the new offensive capabilities touted by the government will not be operational for at least several years. A comment in the *Australian Financial Review* complained that while the strategy outlined a “whole-of-nation” effort and the need to reverse a defence recruitment crisis, it did not mention “mobilisation.” That is a clear reference to discussions in the political establishment about the need for conscription.

The strategy, as well as the response, underscore the fact that the ruling elite and its political representatives, above all Labor, are tobogganing towards a catastrophic war that would threaten the very existence of humanity.



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