

Australian ruling elite reacts nervously to Trump confrontation with Zelensky, Europe

Oscar Grenfell**6 March 2025**

The explosive confrontation between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House last week has roiled the Australian ruling elite, just as it has provoked concerns and consternation in capitals around the world.

For the Australian state, the shifts in US foreign policy have immediate implications. Since World War II, Australian imperialism has prosecuted its own predatory interests under the umbrella of an alliance with the US as the global hegemon. The two are deeply connected, including through a vast increase in the integration of their militaries over recent years, in preparation for war with China.

Trump's readiness to blow up long standing alliances with the European powers has inevitably raised questions in establishment circles over the implications of the deep-going Australian alignment with the US. The questions as raised publicly are not over the US alliance *per se*, but the unpredictability of Trump and the possibility that similar shocks to the old alliance system may be delivered elsewhere.

The blow-up in Europe, moreover, has coincided with public demands from a senior figure in the Trump administration this week for Australia to immediately boost its military spending from 2 to 3 percent of gross domestic product. That hike, which would cost tens of billions of dollars a year, is part of the Trump administration's acceleration of the conflict with Beijing.

For Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Liberal-National opposition leader Peter Dutton, the timing of the rift has provoked more immediate headaches. The eruption of geopolitical conflicts coincides with a federal election that must be held by May 17. Both major parties are in a crisis, with polls predicting a hung parliament resulting in an unstable minority government.

With unofficial election campaigning underway, both Albanese and Dutton have sought to avoid the question of foreign policy. Their support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza and for massive military spending is widely unpopular, and they clearly wish to avoid scrutiny over the uncertain and destabilising implications of the actions of the White House.

Both were nevertheless compelled to respond to Trump berating Zelensky which indicated that the US would back

away from its massive investment in what has effectively been a US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

Albanese declared: “[W]e stand unequivocally with Ukraine in their struggle because we regard that as a struggle for the upholding of international law.” This support would persist “for as long as it takes.”

The Labor prime minister did not directly criticise Trump, nor has he since the inauguration of the fascistic US administration six weeks ago. Albanese has previously refused to comment on Trump's open plans for the ethnic-cleansing of Gaza, his threats to seize Greenland and Canada and his sweeping attacks on democratic rights domestically.

While Albanese did not explicitly speak out against Trump over Ukraine, it is significant that this is the only issue on which the Labor PM has struck a different note to the White House. Albanese differentiated from the fascistic gangster on a right-wing and militarist basis.

Contrary to his assertions, the Ukraine war has nothing to do with the defence of “democracy” or “international law.” It was deliberately provoked by the US and NATO, in order to inflict a major defeat on Russia. The imperialist powers have provided hundreds of billions to Ukraine to prolong the conflict, as hundreds of thousands have been killed. Zelensky rules as a dictator through a Ukrainian state infested with fascistic and Nazi forces.

Australia has been one of the largest non-NATO contributors, providing over \$1.5 billion in aid since the war began. That has included the provision by the Labor government of offensive weaponry to Ukraine.

Albanese's comments dovetailed with those of the European powers, such as Britain, France and Germany, which are committed to continuing the war to advance their own predatory interests on the continent.

The prime minister's statements also echoed the positions of sections of the US military-intelligence establishment, such as the CIA, which are deeply committed to the Ukraine war.

For that wing of the US ruling elite, represented politically by the Democrats, war with Russia is seen as a necessary stepping stone to conflict with China, which is viewed as the chief threat to American global dominance. Trump speaks for another faction, which sees the Ukraine conflict as a costly diversion

from a more immediate confrontation with Beijing.

In an indication that those divisions in the US are being reflected within the Australian political establishment, the Labor government's position has also been marked by uncertainty and a rapid about face.

Senior Labor ministers initially stated that Australia would not participate in a British and European-led plan to dispatch "peacekeepers" to Ukraine. But on Tuesday, following a meeting of the National Security Committee of Cabinet, Albanese told the media that Australia would "give consideration" to any request for participation in such a force.

Contrary to the terminology used, such a deployment would have nothing to do with "peace." It would involve Australia in European-led efforts for a deepening of the conflict with Russia, posing the prospect of a massive war on the European continent.

Dutton also made contradictory statements. On Monday, he described Trump's clash with Zelensky as "disappointing."

Dutton has been one of the few major Western politicians to directly criticise Trump. He said: "In relation to Ukraine, the Australian view at the moment is different to the United States, and my job as Prime Minister will be to lobby the President of the United States to reconsider his position in relation to Ukraine, because I think it's in all of our collective best interests if we're able to provide support to Ukraine, and that's something I'm dedicated to." Albanese's response, he added, had been "weak."

But the very next day, Dutton echoed the positions of the US president. He opposed any deployment of Australian forces to Ukraine, stating: "I think the Europeans have that task, and I think what President Trump's pointed out is that the Europeans need to do more in the defence of Europe, and that's a statement of the obvious."

Dutton's comment coincided with warnings from figures around the national-security establishment that such a deployment would be costly, could have little impact and divert resources from the build-up against China in the Indo-Pacific.

Notwithstanding their gyrations, both Albanese and Dutton have repeatedly emphasised their ironclad commitment to the US alliance. Stronger US-Australia defence ties and the transformation of the continent into a forward base for a US-led conflict with Beijing has been the centrepiece policy of the Albanese government, with full support from the Coalition.

That reflects the fact that the dominant sections of the Australian ruling elite view their own predatory interests, particularly in the South Pacific, as best being prosecuted as part of the US military drive throughout the region.

This is coming with increasing demands, however.

Speaking to the US Senate's Armed Services Committee on Wednesday, Elbridge Colby, Trump's nominee to head policy at the US Defence Department, demanded a massive boost to Australian military expenditure. "The main concern the United States should press with Australia, consistent with the

president's approach, is higher defence spending," Colby stated. He added: "Australia is currently well below the 3 percent level advocated for NATO, by NATO Secretary General [Mark] Rutte, and Canberra faces a far more powerful challenge in China."

The comments were striking for being delivered in public, for putting a dollar figure on the demand and for explicitly connecting this to the preparations for conflict with China.

Marcus Hellyer, a defence economist, told the *Age* that an increase from the 2 percent of GDP currently spent on the military to 3 percent would equate to a rise from \$56 billion a year to a nominal \$130 billion in ten years. Under conditions of a budget deficit, predicted to last for at least a decade, the increase would mean a massive intensification of the assault on healthcare, education and every other area of social spending.

Yesterday, Albanese responded to Colby's comments, declaring that "Australia determines our national interest." He touted the fact that the Labor government has already increased military spending to record levels, and is rolling out missiles and other offensive capabilities across every branch of the defence force.

Those comments, along with the discussion about deploying troops to Ukraine, must serve as a warning to the working class. Whatever the twists and turns of foreign policy, Australia is deeply enmeshed in what already has the character of a developing world war. The program of Labor, the Coalition and every other official party is militarism and war.

The only alternative is building a socialist movement of the working class, aimed at abolishing the root cause of the descent into global conflict and barbarism, the capitalist system itself.



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