

# Australia: Bipartisan vow to end Chinese lease of Darwin port points to war plans

Mike Head, SEP candidate for the seat of Oxley  
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In the first week of the campaign for the May 3 Australian federal election, both the Labor government and the Liberal-National Coalition suddenly announced plans last Friday and Saturday to terminate a Chinese company's lease over the strategic northern Australian civilian port of Darwin.

There was even a race to do so. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese called a local radio station on Friday to vow to end the 99-year lease if Labor wins the election, gazumping a planned declaration the next day by Coalition leader Peter Dutton.

For all the posturing over who was first, it was a revealing display of basic bipartisan political unity behind US preparations for war against China, which are being intensified by the Trump administration as it ramps up its global tariff and trade war, particularly targeting China.

A decade ago, in 2015, the Northern Territory Country Liberal Party government, backed by the then Coalition federal government, sold the long-term lease for \$507 million to Chinese billionaire Ye Cheng's Landbridge Group. Both Albanese and Dutton have now pledged to force Landbridge to sell the lease to an Australian-controlled entity or else their government would compulsorily acquire the port.

The strategic significance of Darwin, the only deep-water port in northern Australia, was underscored during World War II when it hosted an expanded US naval base from 1942 to 1945, out of which submarines, warships, PT boats and an aircraft carrier operated against Japan. For that reason, Darwin faced 64 Japanese air raids between February 1942 and November 1943, in which more than 200 people died.

Today, the port is even more critical to war plans. Darwin has become the hub of the transformation of northern Australia into a platform for war against China, a process deepened by the Albanese government, working closely with the Biden administration.

From the outset, Washington railed against the Darwin port lease. During the 2015 Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC) summit in Manila, US President Barack Obama publicly reprimanded Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, insisting that the US should be given "a heads-up about these sort of things."

Nevertheless, the lease survived, until now.

As recently as October 2023, Albanese backed a formal review he ordered by his department, which found it was "not necessary to vary or cancel the lease." Albanese said at that time: "Landbridge can continue to operate the port... there won't be an intervention for any forced sale."

Likewise, a 2021 review—commissioned when Dutton was the Morrison Coalition government's defence minister—concluded there were no "national security" grounds to terminate the arrangement.

Neither Albanese nor Dutton could explain their reversals of these previous denials that the lease represented a military threat, except to declare that the "strategic circumstances" had shifted, making it essential to take control over a "strategic asset."

Clearly, however, the rush to scrap the lease is bound up with the Trump White House's ever-more incendiary trade war measures against China, which successive US administrations have identified as the main economic and military threat to the dominant position that American imperialism acquired through World War II.

Yesterday, Defence Minister Richard Marles admitted at a media conference to discussing the issue with US officials. But he repeatedly refused to answer journalists' questions about whether the Trump administration had pressured the Albanese government to end the lease to the Chinese firm.

Marles insisted that all such discussions must remain "confidential"—that is, hidden from the view of the working class.

What is known is that Marles visited the US in early February and met senior officials, including Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, who recently visited the Philippines and Japan to dramatically escalate Washington's preparations for war with China.

Highlighting the Darwin decision, *Newsweek* reported that US officials were "'increasingly concerned' by the port lease agreement since the re-election of President Donald Trump."

The American news magazine also noted that the ending of the lease came "after a US nuclear-powered submarine made a stopover near the port last month," drawing "attention to the port lease contract."

The USS *Minnesota*, a Virginia-class fast-attack submarine,

made the highly visible visit to Darwin on March 27, mooring alongside the submarine tender USS Emory S. Land, triggering heightened security measures around the city's harbour.

Such visits by potentially nuclear-armed submarines and other US warships are also occurring with increasing frequency at the Stirling naval base near Perth in Western Australia. It is being expanded to host the AUKUS submarines, which are due for use against China over the next decade.

Key to the AUKUS pact is Australia's acquisition of long-range nuclear-powered submarines from the US, before jointly building a new design with the UK, at a staggering combined cost of \$368 billion.

The cancellation of the Darwin lease is part of a wider move by Washington to seize control of vital ports globally. It came just after the Trump administration coerced the Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison to sell two ports at either end of the Panama Canal to a BlackRock-led consortium.

In the Indo-Pacific, as everywhere, the fascist Trump regime is escalating previous war preparations. In December, Biden's Defence Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III announced plans to ramp up the US forces in Darwin, declaring China to be a threat to peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific.

The increased US presence includes the deployment of the most potent strike assets of the US Air Force—bomber task forces, fighter jets and other aircraft—together with navy and army capabilities, and the use of Darwin's harbour services for vessels, equipment, exercises and logistics, and to resupply.

These war preparations, already underway, include constructing expanded runways and other facilities at the Australian air force base in Darwin, and the Tindal air force base, south of Darwin, to accommodate six B-52 nuclear-armed bombers, and building a \$156-million facility at Darwin Port to store about 80 million gallons of fuel.

As these developments show, Australia will be automatically involved in all US military operations, including wars, in the Indo-Pacific. The US spying and war planning facility of Pine Gap in central Australia also plays a central role in American surveillance and military operations throughout the region.

Labor governments have long been in the forefront of such plans, acting on behalf of the Australian capitalist class, not just US imperialism. Australia is an imperialist power, albeit a more minor one. It prosecutes its predatory economic and geopolitical interests internationally, and especially throughout the Pacific region. As a secondary power, Australia has always operated under the aegis of a more powerful imperialist protector: before 1941 the British Empire, and since then, the United States.

In 2011, the Greens-backed minority Gillard Labor government signed up to the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," including a vast military build-up in preparation for war against China. At that stage, the centrepiece was the establishment of a US Marine base in Darwin, through which up to 2,500 US Marines now "rotate" for six months each year.

Albanese's government has taken this to a new level. Its Defence Strategic Review, released in April 2023, repudiated previous military doctrines, nominally based on the defence of the Australian continent. Instead, the military would need "impactful projection" throughout the Indo-Pacific, combined with a "whole-of-society" war effort.

Backed by the Coalition, the Labor government has also fully supported Israel's intensifying genocide in Gaza, as part of its backing for US-led imperialist wars globally, as well as the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, aiding Kiev's fascist regime.

On every aspect of war there is not a slither of difference between Labor and the Coalition, as the Darwin port takeover vows further demonstrate. Whatever their anxious efforts to distance themselves from Trump's catastrophic agenda, at least until after the election, they are both committed to this path, and to inflicting the burden of war on the working class via deep cuts to social programs in order to vastly increase military spending.

The Socialist Equality Party candidates in this election are the only ones exposing and opposing Australia's transformation into a frontline state for war with China. This plunge into war demonstrates the urgency of workers and young people joining the fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, directed against the source of war, the capitalist system itself.

In our election statement, we say:

- End the genocide in Gaza, and the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine!

- No more spending on militarism! The billions squandered on war must immediately be redirected to the public hospitals, schools and other social services.

- Close the military bases that are transforming Australia into a launching pad for war!

- Build a socialist anti-war movement that unites workers worldwide against the source of conflict, the capitalist system!

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