Australian defence minister visits Washington to desperately seek Trump-Albanese meeting

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A sudden, unscheduled visit by Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles to Washington this week had an air of crisis to it. For days, there was confusion over why Marles had made the trip and who he had met.

This morning, the purpose became clear with unnamed sources telling media outlets including the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* that Marles had been dispatched on a mission to secure a meeting between Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and US President Donald Trump.

While in Washington, Marles had reportedly given unspecified commitments to boost Australian military spending, following a concerted and public campaign for such an increase by the top representatives of the US government.

The trip, and the circumstances surrounding it, point to the rather desperate efforts of the Australian Labor government to solidify and deepen relations with the fascistic Trump administration.

Labor is seeking to ensure the continuation of the AUKUS military pact directed against China, and a broader expansion of military relations which have already transformed Australia into a frontline state for a catastrophic US-led war in the Indo-Pacific.

Marles issued a statement Sunday night Australian time announcing the trip, but providing no details as to its purpose. He departed early in the week and spent two days in Washington.

On Wednesday Australian time, Marles posted an image to X of himself with US Vice-President J.D. Vance and Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth. The post did not indicate what had been discussed, merely providing a couple of sentences about the importance of the US-Australian alliance.

Marles also met with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, with similarly few details publicly provided.

Aside from the secrecy, the range of meetings was unusual. It would not be uncommon for a defence minister to meet his direct counterpart or other US leaders responsible for foreign policy. But there was no clear indication as to why Marles would speak with Vance or with Miller, a Trump loyalist whose central focus has been on the government's fascistic attacks on immigrants.

The confusion deepened when the Pentagon released a statement, bizarrely contradicting Marles' claims to have had a meeting with Hegseth. It had only been a "happenstance encounter" the statement declared.

That appeared to be a calculated humiliation. The image conjured up was of Marles stalking the corridors of Washington and literally bailing up top Trump administration officials for discussion. Only after considerable surprise was expressed in the Australian media did the Pentagon reverse its position and state that a meeting had indeed taken place.

The media reports this morning seem to have revealed the real purpose of the trip. Marles, a right-wing figure with a reputation for close ties to the US military-intelligence establishment, was dispatched to try to clear the way for Albanese to meet with Trump.

The fact that such a meeting has not taken place is a major embarrassment for Albanese and the source of something of a crisis for his government.

When Albanese was returned to office in the May election, he immediately touted the alliance and pledged to work closely with Trump. But attempts to hold a meeting have failed or been rebuffed.

A face-to-face discussion had been scheduled for the May G7 summit, but Trump effectively stood Albanese up, leaving before it was held. Albanese is travelling to the US for a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly next month, but there is no firm appointment for a meeting with Trump. That leaves Albanese as one of the few, or possibly the only leader of a major ally not to have met with the US president.

Several factors underlie the apparent tensions. As with countries around the world, allies and foes alike, Australia has not been spared from Trump's economic war on the

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world. While the so-called “reciprocal tariff’ imposed on Australia is just 10 percent, threatened imposts on pharmaceuticals and agriculture could have a major impact.

But more fundamental is the US demand that Australia go even further than it has already in its commitment to war with China. Almost from the moment of Albanese’s reelection, the Trump administration has been publicly insisting on the need for a massive increase in Australian military spending.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, the region’s premier security forum, Hegseth demanded that US allies in the Indo-Pacific increase their military spending to 5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). He then issued a statement insisting that Australia boost its spending to 3.5 percent of GDP as soon as possible. In its previous term, Labor already took annual military expenditure to a record of more than $50 billion, but that is only a little over 2 percent of GDP.

Trump administration officials have also conveyed through the press demands that Australia, along with Japan, commit their militaries to participation in a possible war with China ahead of time. That call has been made as Hegseth forecast the prospect of “imminent” conflict, and US military officials have “predicted” war with China over control of Taiwan within the next several years.

In June, it was revealed that Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eldridge Colby was conducting a “review” of AUKUS. Under the militarist pact with the US and the UK, Australia is to acquire nuclear-powered submarines at a cost of $368 billion. Australia has committed to subsidise US naval shipbuilding to the tune of almost $5 billion, with Marles handing over the first installment of $500 million earlier this year.

It is increasingly clear that Colby’s review, which has dragged on for over two months despite being set for 30 days, is being used as a threat by which to extract the demanded concessions of increased defence spending and more explicit military commitments from the Labor government.

On Tuesday, as Marles was in Washington, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an influential US think tank, called for Trump to maintain AUKUS. But it insisted that Australia should give “concrete” commitments as to how US-provided Virginia-class submarines would be deployed in a conflict.

Under conditions where it is evident that US shipbuilding capacity is not adequate for the demands of the American navy, let alone to provide 3 to 5 Virginia-class submarines to Australia over the coming years, the CSIS insisted on the need for allies including Australia to provide further subsidies.

Pillar 2 of the AUKUS agreement, it stated, would need to be refocussed. It currently encompasses a broad array of areas, many of which are still in a conceptual phase, such as greater collaboration on AI and Quantum Computing. Instead, CSIS stated that Pillar 2 should prioritise more immediate war-fighting capabilities, including long-range missiles, autonomous weapons platforms and integrated air and missile defence systems.

While the media has stated that Marles gave commitments to increase military spending while in Washington, there is no indication of what they consisted of, nor if he made other pledges, such as a guarantee that any US-provided military assets will be activated in a war against China.

That underscores the anti-democratic character of the entire military build-up. There is no pretence that such vast decisions are to be made by parliament or to be the subject of public discussion.

In its first term, Labor already went a long way to completing Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for war with China. That has included a vast expansion of US basing, and the largest build-up of the Australian military in 85 years.

The fact that more is being demanded underscores the centrality of Australia to the US war plans, and how advanced those preparations are.

Marles’ visit raises another issue. On Tuesday, Albanese and Mike Burgess, the head of ASIO, Australia’s spy agency, held a press conference. They declared that Iran was responsible for two murky antisemitic incidents that occurred in Sydney and Melbourne last year. Albanese and Burgess did not provide a skerrick of proof for their assertion, which was entirely implausible. But Labor nevertheless expelled the Iranian ambassador, in a major diplomatic and geopolitical provocation.

The question inevitably emerges: was the announcement and expulsion an attempt to curry favour with Washington, under conditions of Marles’ visit and amid the stepped-up demands for an increase to military spending?

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