

At Sydney weapons expo, Labor outlines military build-up for war against China

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The biannual Indo Pacific International Maritime Exposition, which began in Sydney yesterday and concludes tomorrow, is a festival of militarist reaction and war planning, bringing together defence leaders, intelligence agents, pro-war academics and the largest arms dealers in the world.

An Australian government press release highlighted the scale of the event, boasting that it is “one of the world’s largest maritime expositions,” with this year’s iteration featuring more than 900 exhibitors and naval delegations from over 50 countries. That includes naval representatives of all the major imperialist powers, the US, the UK, the European nations and a host of other American allies, particularly from the Indo-Pacific.

The expo, which receives millions in funding from the federal and New South Wales (NSW) state governments, has been a large-scale event for years.

But its evident expansion, into a major regional and even world gathering, points to the centrality of maritime operations in the Indo-Pacific to global geopolitics, above all in a US-led war drive directed against China, which is viewed as the chief threat to the hegemony of American imperialism.

The opening day of the expo encapsulated two of the key policies of the federal Labor government: a complete commitment to that war drive and the repression of popular opposition.

As government leaders proclaimed a vast military expansion inside the expo, outside of it a relatively small protest, called in opposition to the presence of Israeli weapons companies involved in the Gaza genocide, was brutally attacked by riot police.

Labor’s Defence Minister Richard Marles was the keynote speaker at a breakfast that opened the expo. His remarks were those of a spokesman of the military-intelligence apparatus, whose passion is war.

Marles hailed the weapons of war on display at the expo

as spanning “the breadth of the beautiful, the menacing and the extremely cool.” The various drones, missiles, bombs and spying devices to be showcased “display the very best of human ingenuity.”

When he witnessed the destructive power that he had unleashed with the creation of the atomic bomb, US scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer cited a harrowing passage of the Bhagavad Gita: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” Marles, looking upon horrific military potential, replies: “Extremely cool.”

Marles expounded on the extent of Labor’s expansion of the military, especially since its reelection in May. Since then, reassuring the US that it will devote sufficient resources to the military build-up has been a central focus of the government, under conditions where senior figures in the Trump administration have publicly demanded vast increases in defence spending from Australia and other regional allies.

Marles declared that Labor’s aim was “to have a more amphibious army, to have longer range missiles, to have a more capable set of northern bases which enable our Air Force to project further, but chief among those capabilities is having a long-range, highly capable Navy.”

He listed a series of “investments, literally in the last few months,” which were all “about building a much more capable, lethal, long-range Navy.”

That included the decision to purchase Mogami-class advanced frigates from Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. The purchase is part of an overhaul of the entire navy, aimed at developing a faster fleet that can carry out operations far into the Indo-Pacific at short notice and that is equipped with strike capabilities, including new missiles.

By buying the frigates from Japan, Labor is also encouraging that country’s remilitarisation and is solidifying a web of alliances between Washington’s regional partners, directed against China.

Marles cited the \$1.7 billion spend on autonomous

“Ghost Shark” underwater drones. They will be capable, not only of conducting reconnaissance and spying, but also of firing missiles. Labor has indicated that dozens of them will be operational from early next year.

And he pointed to the “decision to invest \$12.5 billion in the Henderson Defence Precinct in Perth.” That facility, closely connected to the Stirling Naval Base, is to transform the Western Australian capital into a hub of naval operations. It will host US nuclear-powered submarines, and a contingent of more than 1,000 US personnel.

For years, the US has been pushing for an expanded presence at Stirling and in Perth, with hawkish American think-tanks proclaiming that it could become the most important US base on the Indian Ocean.

Marles presented the Labor government as the most committed to military expansion in years. “Relative to what we inherited when we came into office, in the last three and a half years, we have increased our Defence spending by more than \$70 billion over the decade, but that’s also investment in the here and now.” The spend on procurements, i.e., weaponry and assets, had been higher in the past two financial years than ever before, he boasted.

When they speak at international fora, Labor leaders sometimes cynically downplay the war preparations, instead speaking of the need to “balance” the “strategic competition” between the US and China and to ensure that there are “guardrails” in place to prevent conflict. That was the character of Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s remarks, during his visit to Asia last week for a series of regional summits.

Marles, speaking before a militarist audience, dispensed with such subterfuge. The entire military build-up, he made plain, was directed against China. He asserted: “The biggest military build-up in the world today is China, and that it is happening without strategic reassurance, means that for Australia and for so many countries, a response is demanded.”

The “daily” work of the navy would be to conduct operations in the East and South China Seas directed against that threat to the “international rules-based order.”

There was an obvious contradiction. While accusing China of carrying out an unparalleled military build-up, Marles was boasting that Labor was overseeing the largest expansion of the Australian military in decades. That forms only one part of a vast build-up, led by the US, including the stationing of some of its most potent strike capabilities, including those that can carry nuclear

weapons, in Australia and throughout the region.

Absurdly, Marles presented Australian operations as necessary to protect shipping lanes for trade. China has no interest whatsoever in choking such shipping lanes, which are crucial to its economy. The US, however, has for over a decade mapped out a plan for war with China, that would include a naval blockade, in which Australia would serve as a “southern anchor” for US and allies forces.

The speech by Labor’s Defence Industry minister Pat Conroy was similarly frothing. He explicitly defended Australia’s purchase of military supplies from Israel, amid the massive war crimes it is carrying out against the people of Gaza. “We make no apology for making sure that our soldiers, sailors and aviators have the best equipment to protect Australia’s interest,” Conroy declared.

He repeated Labor’s lie that Australia has not exported weapons to Israel, even after repeated exposures by Declassified Australia, which has published evidence of military components being dispatched to the Zionist regime as recently as September.

Amid the demonstrations outside the conference, Conroy begrudgingly acknowledged “the right to protest.” But he added an anti-democratic rider, declaring, “what I’m calling for is respect for the ADF [Australian Defence Force] and respect for the 100,000 Australians who work in the Australian defence industry.”

Clearly, however, anti-war opposition and condemnations of the government’s complicity in the Israeli genocide and ongoing atrocities in Gaza is not permissible.

The message inside was enacted outside. A major mobilisation of riot police, deployed by the NSW Labor government, aggressively accosted and in some instances attacked overwhelmingly peaceful protests.

Footage posted online has shown cops grabbing people, dragging and otherwise brutalising them, and indiscriminately deploying pepper spray into crowds.

The entire thrust of Labor’s militarist program, and that police operation, underscore the reality that the drive to imperialist war is incompatible with democratic rights.



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