

# Australia's National Defence Strategy outlines military build-up for war against China

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Australia's 2026 National Defence Strategy (NDS), released yesterday, is a statement of the Labor government's complete commitment to US-led wars globally, and above all to Washington's advanced preparations for a catastrophic war against China.

The NDS has been accompanied by a commitment to increase military spending by \$53 billion over the coming decade, on top of record defence expenditure of almost \$60 billion this financial year.

As significant as the size of the outlay is the focus of the NDS and an associated "Integrated Investment Program" on the acquisition of missiles, drones and other weaponry of a plainly offensive character. That is in line with Labor's 2023 Defence Strategic Review, which called for every branch of the military to be overhauled, with the aim of "impactful projection" and strike capacity, above all in the Indo-Pacific.

Introducing the NDS at the National Press Club, Defence Minister Richard Marles delivered a frothingly militarist address.

He began by hailing Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel deployed to the United Arab Emirates last month to participate in the utterly criminal US-led war against Iran.

Some 85 aviators were dispatched, alongside a Boeing E-7 Wedgetail, which functions as an airborne military command centre. The Wedgetail can provide targeting information, which would be used by US fighter jets in their bombardment of Iran. Marles did not mention them, but 90 Special Forces soldiers are also in the Middle East, undoubtedly preparing to participate in a ground invasion of Iran if it eventuates.

Echoing language in the NDS, Marles noted that "International norms that once constrained the use of force and military coercion continue to erode. More countries are engaged in conflict today than at any time since the end of World War II, and this is occurring across every region of the world."

There was a glaring contradiction in the speech. Marles uttered not a word of criticism about the chief power tearing up those "norms" and utilising "force and military coercion," i.e., the United States.

He was speaking mere weeks after US President Donald Trump threatened to return Iran to the "stone ages," and to end its civilisation entirely. Those genocidal statements are the sharpest expression of a militarist rampage, with the US not only setting the Middle East ablaze, but engaging in a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine and intensifying its aggression against China.

Instead, Marles gave a full commitment to participate in American imperialism's program of global war, aimed at offsetting its economic decline through unvarnished military might.

A substantial portion of his speech, and of the NDS itself, was a denunciation of one of the only major states not currently at war, China. It "continues to engage in the world's largest conventional military build-up since World War II without the transparency and strategic reassurance other states expect," Marles stated, in a complete inversion of reality.

He similarly warned of a "nuclear arms race" particularly in the Indo-Pacific, but again referenced China, not the US, which both rings the world with some 800 military bases and possesses the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons.

Marles repeated the usual US litany of accusations against Beijing, including that it is engaging in aggressive activities in the South and East China Seas. In reality, those have been transformed into potential flashpoints for conflict by the US, which is conducting a vast military build-up in the Indo-Pacific and seeking to encircle China with a web of aggressive military alliances.

In the context of his denunciations of China, Marles proclaimed, "Accordingly, we have been creating an ADF that is able to operate at greater range, that can engage in impactful projection: a more amphibious army; more capable northern bases that can project our air force further; longer range missiles; a much more capable surface fleet; and the acquisition of long range nuclear powered submarines."

Marles rattled off the military acquisitions the government has completed and has committed to. Outlined in detail in the "Integrated Investment Program," they underscore a transformation of the military in preparation for a conflict with

China, that would above all centre on naval warfare.

A graph in the plan, titled “Proportional investment for the decade 2026–2036 by capability priority” shows that fully 23 percent of that spending will be dedicated to “undersea warfare” and 15 percent to “maritime capabilities for sea denial and localised sea control operations.” Those latter phrases are military jargon for the imposition of a naval blockade that would target key shipping routes in the Indo-Pacific, through which most of China’s trade passes.

“Proportional investment for the decade 2026?2036 by domain” is even more stark, with 41 percent earmarked as “maritime.” The 2023 Defence Strategic Review, as well as this year’s NDS, both call for a fundamental shift in the military, away from a focus on land-based operations as in the neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and towards preparations for a naval war.

The figures in the plan point not only to the vast outlays that have already been made, but the far greater expenditure that is planned.

The greater part of the “undersea warfare” capability spending is on Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS pact with the US and the UK. Such submarines have far greater range and speed than their diesel-powered counterparts and could operate as far as the Chinese coast.

The plan states that, thus far, the AUKUS submarine project has \$11 billion in “approved planned investment,” but that a further \$60-\$85 billion in “unapproved planned investment” will be required over the decade. Somewhere between \$62 and \$77 billion in investments are planned for the surface navy, whose fleet is being doubled in size, with only \$25 billion listed as budgeted.

Central to the naval expansion is Australia’s acquisition of 11 Mogami frigates. The plan declares they will increase the “lethality” of the navy, noting that they can travel at “a range of up to 10,000 nautical miles,” possess “a 32?cell vertical launch system” and are “fitted with surface?to?air missiles and anti?ship missiles.”

Such strike capabilities are central to the plan. A graph boasts of a vast expansion of the distance at which each branch of the military can strike through missile capabilities, with the most dramatic being an increase in range for naval strikes from 120 kilometres to 2,500.

The plan also outlines a focus on drones, which both Marles and the NDS noted have been central to the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. The ADF is preparing to rollout a “ghost bat” drone that can attack aerial targets, and a “ghost shark” craft, dozens of which are slated to be deployed in the waters of the Indo-Pacific, with the capability to attack both maritime and land targets.

The entire build-up is occurring as part of a deepening of the US-Australia alliance. That includes the establishment of a vast naval precinct in Perth, Western Australia, which will function

as one of the main US maritime bases adjacent to the strategically critical Indian Ocean, and the transformation of the north of the continent into a launching pad for aerial operations far into the Indo-Pacific, including by US B-52 bombers, which can carry nuclear weapons.

While Labor is deepening Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for war with China, far more is being demanded. At the press club in questions to Marles and in commentary in the financial press this morning, the announcements have been met with a general hostility.

The concern of these mouthpieces of the ruling elite are not the catastrophic consequences of war with China, but that Labor is not preparing rapidly enough. There are complaints that much of the new \$53 billion in funding is backended to the latter part of the decade. Marles declared that military spending as a proportion of gross domestic product would reach 3 percent around 2032. But there are denunciations from hawkish commentators that the measure includes some pensions for military veterans and other spends that are not directly dedicated to warfare.

The response of the official press is in line with the demands of the Trump administration. It publicly insisted last year that Australia, along with other allies in the Indo-Pacific, immediately lift their military expenditure to 3.5 percent over the decade.

The ongoing demands, no less than the measures Labor has already undertaken, are a warning to the working class. Firstly, they demonstrate that major wars are not a thing of the future, but as the assault on Iran demonstrates, of the present. And secondly, the vast sums to be diverted to weapons of war will be paid for by the working class, through an unprecedented assault on healthcare, education and other crucial social spending.

An anti-war movement must be built against the Labor government, its imperialist counterparts and their program of war. Such a movement must be based on the working class, uniting it internationally in a struggle against the source of war, and of austerity and authoritarianism, the capitalist system.



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