

Australian government echoes US threats against China

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The Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore was another demonstration of Australia's central role as a regional attack dog for American imperialism on its war path with China.

The Labor government's Defence Minister Richard Marles was among the most open of delegates to the meetings over the weekend in lining up behind US denunciations of Beijing.

Marles committed to deepening integration into a US-led military build-up, including through the announcement of a new undersea drone program with the US and the UK and the unveiling of a contingency plan to ensure that Australia acquires nuclear-powered submarines from America under the AUKUS pact.

Held three months after the US began its utterly criminal war on Iran, the Asian security forum underscored the reality that the conflict in the Middle East is part of a broader developing war, centring on the aggressive American confrontation with China.

US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth thundered that China was carrying out a "historic military buildup," and threatened that the US would not allow it to become a "hegemon." Given the global militarist rampage of the Trump administration and the fact that Hegseth has dubbed himself the "secretary of war," that was an open threat of a military attack on China.

As at previous Asian forums, Hegseth demanded that US allies dramatically increase their military spending and denounced those that were not as "freeloaders." At the Shangri-La Dialogue a year ago, the Australian government had been in the firing line, with Hegseth publicly insisting that it increase military spending from around 2 percent of gross domestic product to 3.5 percent before further hikes.

Twelve months later, Hegseth gave the Labor government a shoutout, indicating that it was making progress in transforming the continent into a central base for US operations targeting China.

"Australia is stepping up," Hegseth declared. "Together, we are expanding the rotational presence of US forces and collaborating to ensure our defence industrial bases build

and sustain weapons required for a high-end fight."

He added: "We appreciate Australia's investment in real combat power and the commitment to integrate more deeply with the US joint force across South-East Asia."

Marles is a colourless career politician, whereas Hegseth is a fascistic demagogue. Despite the differences in manner, they were singing from an identical songbook, such that their remarks could have been scripted by the same speechwriter.

Marles, like Hegseth, repeated the litany of Washington's false accusations against Beijing, with scarcely any attempt to camouflage his target.

In what was an almost word for word repeat of Hegseth's main allegation, Marles claimed that "a military build-up of historic proportions" by China was "reshaping the strategic landscape."

Marles declared: "In the South China Sea, the region continues to contend with extensive militarisation, the construction of artificial islands, and increasingly assertive naval and coastguard operations." He favourably referenced US-sponsored legal action by the Philippines against China over disputed territory in the sea. That is one flashpoint that has been deliberately inflamed by Washington over more than a decade.

Marles referenced other anti-China talking points, including claims that it was operating a "shadow fleet" of nominally private fishing vessels that were doing the work of the Chinese government.

That rather lame accusation was one component of his claim that the "international rules-based order" was under unprecedented threat, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. That legally meaningless phrase has been used to describe the post-World War II order based on US hegemony.

Given the utter lawlessness of the Trump administration, the hypocrisy is staggering. While delivering paeans to the "rules-based order," Marles was also fawning over Hegseth, who in the context of the illegal assault on Iran only months ago proclaimed that the US would show "no quarter, no mercy," and would disregard "stupid rules of engagement."

Significantly, Marles went beyond the general anti-Chinese propaganda. Much of his remarks centred on the operational realities of how a war in the Indo-Pacific would be fought. As Marles noted, such a conflict would largely be a maritime war, and he boasted that over 40 percent of Australia's recent spending on military acquisitions centred on that domain.

"The seabed is becoming a battlefield," Marles proclaimed. He made unsubstantiated claims that the region was witnessing repeated and increasing sabotage of undersea cables. Marles specifically referred to Taiwan, which is the most dangerous flashpoint for a war with China and is being militarised under Washington's auspices. He claimed its cables had been subjected to repeated sabotage.

Marles drew a direct connection between those allegations and similar events in the Baltic Sea, where the US-NATO proxy war is raging against Russia in Ukraine. He also referenced the centrality of drone warfare to the conflict in the Middle East sparked by the US assault on Iran.

It was in that context that Hegseth, Marles and their British counterpart John Healey unveiled a plan for the development of uncrewed undersea vehicles, i.e., underwater drones, under the AUKUS pact between the three countries. They declared that the drones would patrol the Indo-Pacific on the pretext of protecting undersea cables.

Marles' example of Taiwanese undersea cables indicates that the drones would operate throughout the region, right up to the shores of the Chinese mainland. The claims that these underwater drones would be defensive are a sham. The joint statement between the three defence ministers boasted that they would be equipped with "cutting edge payloads and enabling systems."

When the US launched its vast military build-up in the Indo-Pacific in 2011, it explicitly developed the concept of an "airsea battle" directed against China, which would include a naval blockade cutting off the shipping routes upon which it depends for the bulk of its trade. That is the real content of the frenzied preoccupation by the US and its allies, particularly Australia, with developing and deploying maritime strike capabilities.

That is also why the major powers are determined to press ahead with Pillar One of AUKUS, under which Australia is to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US, before developing a fleet of new models in collaboration with the UK.

For several years, doubts have been raised in strategic circles, as well as by US and Australian politicians, as to whether the US shipbuilding sector has the capacity to construct Virginia-class submarines that could be transferred to Australia. That question was effectively answered in the negative over the weekend.

Instead, it was confirmed that the US would transfer three used Virginia-class subs. A number of Australian pundits bemoaned a "bad deal," given that the total AUKUS cost is estimated at \$368 billion, and Marles has already delivered payments of \$US2 billion to the Trump administration, under an AUKUS arrangement to subsidise the US naval construction sector.

Such complaints are a diversion from the fundamental reality that is revealed by the deal, namely that the Labor government is rapidly pressing ahead with its commitment to join a US war with China. In addition to the transfer of the subs, direct US basing is also expanding.

A naval precinct in Perth is set to permanently host nuclear submarines from America's own fleet, in what will be one of US imperialism's most significant bases adjacent to the Indian Ocean. Bases across the north of the continent are being upgraded, including so they can host some of the most potent US strike capabilities, such as B-52 bombers.

Those craft are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, and Australia is increasingly enmeshed in US planning for nuclear war.

All of which underscores the urgent necessity of a political fight against the Labor government, the preeminent party of Australian imperialism, as part of the struggle to build an anti-war movement of the international working class directed against a capitalist system that is hurtling towards a new global conflagration.



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