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Australia's foreign minister visits Beijing to mend fractured relations

Yesterday, Penny Wong, foreign minister in the Australian Labor government, held high-level talks in Beijing, including a meeting with her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi—the first visit by an Australian minister in more than three years. The trip coincided with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.



Penny Wong and Wang Yi at the 6th Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue [Photo: @SenatorWong]

The Australian media presented Wong's trip in glowing terms. Without in anyway resiling from its protracted anti-China campaign, the official press has spoken of a "thaw" and a new period in which fractured diplomatic relations with Beijing can be normalised.

The coverage has a fanciful character. It expresses wishful thinking that Australia's ever-deepening involvement in the aggressive US-led confrontation against Beijing will not impact substantially on corporate interests. China is Australia's largest trading partner.

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The media hype is also part of a broader campaign to conceal from the population Australia's frontline role in preparations for a war against China that would have catastrophic consequences.

In reality, almost nothing was agreed at the meeting between Wong and Wang, or in any of the other engagements. There were no agreements on trade, the rapidly increasing militarisation of the Indo-Pacific or any other substantive issue.

All that the two foreign ministers resolved, in the vaguest of terms, was to maintain diplomatic relations and hold further talks at an unspecified time.

In the lead-up to the talks and in her public statements in Beijing, Wong made clear that the visit did not mark any shift in the government's attitude to China. Since assuming office in May, the Labor administration has functioned as an attack dog for Washington throughout the region, while committing to an even greater military build-up.

Speaking immediately prior to meeting with Wang, Wong declared: "Today I would like to discuss in the course of this meeting several issues of importance for Australia, which include consular matters, trade blockages, human rights and the global rules and the norms that underpin our security and our prosperity."

Publicly stating this list of topics hardly constituted an olive branch.

Purported Chinese "human rights" violations have been used as a battering ram by Washington and its allies, including Australia, to encourage separatist tendencies in Xinjiang, Tibet and elsewhere, and to ramp up pressure on Beijing. This is an exercise of staggering hypocrisy, not least given the record of the US, and Australia, over the past 30 years in laying waste to large swathes of the Middle East and Central Asia in predatory neo-colonial wars.

The US and its allies frequently accuse Beijing of violating the global rules-based order, which means the world order established by the US after World War II, where it sets the rules to secure its strategic and economic interests.

The consular matters raised by Wong include the detention of two Chinese-Australians, journalist Cheng Lei and author Yang Hengjun, who have been detained on the basis of murky espionage allegations.

Australia's concern over their plight is mired in hypocrisy. Labor, together with the entire political establishment, has done nothing to aid Julian Assange, an Australian journalist imprisoned in Britain and facing extradition to the US for exposing American war crimes.

The references to “trade” relate to Australian complaints over Chinese limitations on the import of wine, barley, seafood and other products. Australia, however, has imposed a host of economic bans on Chinese corporations, including on bogus national security grounds.

In 2012, the previous Labor government blocked Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from involvement in building the fiber-optic National Broadband Network. The current Labor government is reportedly considering measures to block Chinese investment in the critical minerals sector.

More significant than Wong’s hawkish talking points are the actual facts on the ground. Again, beginning with the previous Labor government in 2011, Australia has over the past 11 years been integrated into a vast US military build-up throughout the region, explicitly aimed at preparing for war against China.

Since its election in May, the Labor government has intensified this war drive, alongside the Biden administration.

That is underscored by Wong’s itinerary in the weeks preceding her visit to Beijing. Earlier this month, Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles travelled to Washington for annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations with top Biden administration officials. There they resolved on a further expansion of US basing arrangements in Australia, covering the army, navy, marines and the airforce.

That commitment followed revelations in October that the Labor government had secretly agreed to allow US nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to be stationed in Northern Australia. Defenders of the backroom deal, which effectively overturns Australia’s nuclear weapons-free status, claimed it was necessary to ensure that US strike capabilities would be outside the range of most Chinese missiles in the event of a war.

In Washington, Marles and Wong also participated in the first meeting of AUKUS, a pact between Australia, the US and Britain, openly aimed at militarising the region. The US and British representatives declared that they would ensure Australia acquired nuclear-powered submarines as soon as possible. Under AUKUS, the country is also slated to host hypersonic missiles.

Wong and Marles travelled directly from Washington to Tokyo, where they made the most far-reaching agreements for military cooperation with Japan in Australian history. This includes an undertaking for Japanese fighter-jets to “rotate” through Australia, and for stepped-up collaboration between the two countries on every strategic and military front. It is openly directed against China.

Finally, last week Wong visited the Pacific, where she struck a wide-ranging defence agreement with Vanuatu, which pro-US analysts had previously warned was at risk of coming under Chinese influence. She also visited the tiny nation of Palau, providing its president with an opportunity to make provocative and inflammatory comments against Beijing.

In other words, whatever the talk of “diplomacy” and “shared interests,” Australia under the Labor government is playing an extremely active role in the intensified US pressure against China. An article by the *Australian’s* foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, who has close ties to the military and intelligence establishment, recently blurted out the contents of this campaign with its headline declaring: “The time to start preparing for war with China is now.”

Wong’s visit in no way contradicts this US-led strategy. While inflaming tensions over Taiwan and a host of other flashpoints, Biden met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in November while Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to travel to Beijing early next year.

Undoubtedly, in addition to the public contents of such discussions, backroom threats and demands are being issued. Increasingly feverish diplomacy does not negate the danger of war, but has frequently preceded it, as in the world wars of last century.

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