Australian Labor Party steps up commitment to US alliance in "disrupted world"

By Mike Head
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The Labor Party concluded its three-day national conference in Adelaide yesterday by unanimously adopting a pro-US platform under conditions of rising geo-strategic conflicts and dangers of war, particularly between the US and China.

The most revealing resolution omitted signing the UN nuclear weapons ban treaty, so as not to threaten the US alliance. Another opposed calls for a war powers act to limit the ability of governments to deploy troops or join US-led wars.

These two key motions were adopted without any dissent during the final conference session on "Australia's place in a disrupted world." They underscored Labor's intensified commitment to the US strategic and military alliance on which the Australian ruling class has relied since World War II.

Exactly what was at stake in these resolutions was spelled out in a very public intervention, just hours before the carefully-orchestrated debate on foreign policy, by Gareth Evans, a former foreign minister.

Making a prominent visit to the conference, Evans bluntly declared that signing up to the international campaign to abolish nuclear weapons would amount to "tearing up our US alliance commitment."

Evans, the foreign minister under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1988 to 1996, used an interview with the *Guardian* to warn that if Australia signed the UN treaty it would be banned from assisting the US through the bases at Australia's North-West Cape and Pine Gap, which were "critical components of the alliance relationship."

These satellite and communications bases are pivotal to US military operations throughout the Middle East and Indo-Pacific region, helping to conduct intensive surveillance, and guide missile strikes and drone assassinations.

In the days before the conference, media reports had misleadingly predicted that "Left" faction leaders would call for the adoption of the UN treaty and war powers legislation.

The mooted "Left" amendments to the party platform were designed to head off widespread anti-war sentiment. One measure of this sentiment came in an Ipsos opinion poll a month ago. It showed that 78.9 percent of Australians supported joining the nuclear ban treaty, which 122 countries have signed. Only 7.7 percent were opposed.

By the time the issue got to the conference floor, however, a consensus motion had been drawn up with the help of "Left" leader, ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who had been touted as insisting on signing up to the treaty.

Albanese moved the agreed resolution, which cynically congratulated the pro-treaty International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons for "returning to global prominence the cause of nuclear disarmament" and claimed to agree with the ban treaty's "aspiration to rid the world of nuclear weapons for all time."

After paying lip service to nuclear disarmament, the motion "acknowledged" the "centrality of the US alliance to Australia's national security and strategic policy."

In order to uphold this alliance, the resolution said a Labor government would sign and ratify the treaty, but only after ensuring the treaty's "interaction" with the long-existing Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and working to "achieve universal support for the Ban Treaty."

As everyone involved in this manoeuvre was well aware, this means never signing the UN treaty, because the US and other nuclear powers have refused point blank to support it, determined to retain their monopoly over the use of nuclear weapons via the NPT.

Albanese himself was at pains to emphasise: "I am a strong supporter of the US alliance." He argued that

signing the UN ban treaty, on the terms and conditions contained in the motion, would not interfere with the alliance.

Seconding the motion, however, shadow defence minister Richard Marles echoed Evans. He said it was "no secret" that the US opposed the ban treaty and "the American alliance remains central to Australia's strategic interests."

Shadow foreign minister Penny Wong—a leader of the "Left" faction alongside Albanese—also had made clear her vehement opposition to signing the UN treaty. In October she told the Australian Institute of International Affairs that the ban treaty had "significant shortcomings" and there was "no prospect" of existing nuclear weapons states signing the treaty.

Earlier in yesterday's session, Marles had declared that the US alliance was "more relevant than ever" because Australia faced "the most challenging set of strategic circumstances since the second world war." This was a thinly-veiled reference to the possibility of another world war.

Marles claimed that the rise of China was "fundamentally good"—especially for Australian mining exports. Nevertheless, Labor is totally committed to backing Washington, which is aggressively seeking, via trade and economic war, and military preparations, to prevent China from ever challenging its post-World War II hegemony in the Asia-Pacific and globally.

During the session, Wong sought to satisfy another requirement of Washington—that Australia step up its military, economic and diplomatic activity in the South Pacific in order to block increasing Chinese aid, investment and influence.

Wong said the platform represented a "step-change" in expanding Australia's presence in the Pacific, making it "front and centre" in Australian foreign policy.

Throughout the session, not a single vote was cast against any aspect of this predatory, pro-US imperialist foreign policy.

There was an identical line-up against calls, championed by the "Be Sure on War" group, for legislation requiring parliamentary approval for entering conflict overseas. The outcome was another warning that a Labor government was ready to go to war in defiance of anti-war opposition.

The *Australian* newspaper had reported that members of the "Left," including Albanese and deputy party leader Tanya Plibersek, were advocating a resolution to give parliament to have the authority to declare war and send troops to a foreign battlefield.

Such a resolution would not have challenged the government's power to launch war. Rather, it would have sought to legitimise such a decision by attaching a parliamentary rubber stamp. But the military-intelligence establishment had made it plain that any, even cosmetic, limit on the war power was unacceptable.

Speaking to the *Australian*, Marles, the shadow defence minister, therefore flatly rejected any such resolution. He insisted that deploying military personnel outside Australia must remain "the sole prerogative" of executive government.

As a result, all the factions came together to back a resolution asking a Labor government to refer the issue to an inquiry to be conducted by a parliamentary committee.

The British Labour government convened a similar inquiry following the exposure of the "weapons of mass destruction" lies used to justify involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. That inquiry ended with the power to launch wars being left legally in the sole hands of the prime minister, exercising the ancient "war prerogative" of the monarchy.

The final version of Labor's platform reinforced its unconditional pro-US orientation and war preparations by pledging to ramp up military spending, on top of the $200 billion already promised by the Liberal-National Coalition government over the next decade.

Moreover, the conference vowed to "foster a strong national defence industry" and make it a "national mission," involving all levels of government, employers and the trade unions. This echoes the historical role of Labor governments, which were called to office during both world wars in order to impose the burden on the back of the working class.