

Australia and China conduct joint naval exercises

Peter Symonds
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Amid mounting tensions between the US and China over the South China Sea, the Australian and Chinese navies held exercises together yesterday in the region. Last Tuesday, the US navy dispatched the USS Lassen, a guided-missile destroyer, within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-controlled islets, provoking sharp protests from Chinese authorities.

The long-planned Australian-Chinese exercises went ahead anyway. The US clearly gave its staunch ally, Australia, the green light to proceed, calculating that such an operation could yield valuable information about the procedures and capabilities of the Chinese navy. Australia is the only Western country to conduct “live fire” military exercises with China.

Two Australian Anzac-class frigates, the HMAS Stuart and HMAS Arunta, visited the southern Chinese port of Zhanjiang, home to China’s southern fleet, which is responsible for operations in the South China Sea. As well as live firing with Chinese warships, the visit included a joint planning session, search and rescue training and communications drills.

Discussions were also held to conclude a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea between the two countries, pointing to the underlying tensions and the danger that an incident, whether intentional or accidental, could trigger a broader conflict.

Indeed, as the joint manoeuvres were taking place, a debate was underway within the Australian foreign policy and strategic establishment over whether Australia should emulate the United States and carry out its own provocative “freedom of navigation” operation to challenge Chinese territorial claims.

Canberra gave its full support to the USS Lassen’s intervention last week. Defence Minister Marise Payne immediately issued a statement declaring: “It is important to recognise that all states have a right under

international law to freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight, including in the South China Sea.” Australia, she said, “strongly supports these rights.”

Such comments are completely hypocritical. The competing territorial claims in the South China Sea were only elevated into an international issue after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in 2010 that the US had a “national interest” in “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. She openly encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam, in particular, to aggressively pursue their territorial claims against China.

Since the beginning of the year, US government and military officials have mounted a sustained campaign against Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea. While Washington has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) itself, it has repeatedly insisted that Chinese territorial claims are illegitimate under international law. Canberra has dutifully parroted the same line.

Now the US wants Australia to go further by sending warships to challenge China’s territorial claims and boost the legitimacy of its own actions. Australian imperialism, which is heavily reliant on the United States to pursue its strategic interests in Asia and internationally, has repeatedly functioned as Washington’s accomplice in its illegal wars in the Middle East and provocations around the world.

Writing in the Lowy Institute’s *Interpreter* last Thursday, former Australian admiral James Goldrick argued that “Australia must send its navy to assert freedom to operate in the South China Sea.” He declared that “there are legitimate fears that the sweeping, indeed absolute, ‘blue land’ claims by China in the South China Sea could, in the worst case, have long-term implications for free passage of

merchant shipping through this area.”

This argument ignores the fact that it is China, rather than the US or Australia, that has a great deal to lose if shipping is impeded. Many of its imports of energy and raw materials come from Africa and the Middle East and pass through the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. Beijing is deeply concerned at the potential of the US and its allies to mount an economic blockade in the event of war, which is precisely what Pentagon strategists have discussed. Washington’s demand for “freedom of navigation” seeks to ensure the continued dominance of the US navy in the South China Sea, close to the Chinese mainland and key military installations.

Goldrick advocated an unambiguous assertion of this “right” by the Australian navy, explaining that it should undertake “the normal range of activities which they would on the high seas, including manoeuvring, the use of active and passive sensors and even the operation of shipborne helicopters.” By doing so, the ship would make clear that it was not asserting “innocent passage”—a restricted right open to warships that does not challenge territorial claims.

“The operation should be conducted without warning and it should not be the matter for an immediate press release,” Goldrick concluded. He is not alone. Others, including former Labor Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and senior government defence strategist Paul Dibbs, have also advocated dispatching warships or military aircraft to challenge Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

Beijing is well aware that Australia is one of the most likely countries to follow the US in its provocations in the South China Sea. In response to a *Wall Street Journal* article last week indicating that Australian military planners were preparing for a naval intervention, a Chinese military spokesman, Senior Colonel Li Jie, warned that such operations could “only bring trouble.”

To date the Australian government has not indicated that it will send ships or aircraft through territory claimed by China. Canberra is conscious that such actions risk retaliation by China, on which Australian capitalism depends as its largest export market. The suggestion that the two Australian warships involved in yesterday’s exercises could intrude into Chinese-claimed waters on their return from the port of

Zhanjiang appears to have been ruled out as too much of a slap in the face to Beijing.



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