

Pressure mounts on Australian government to challenge China in South China Sea

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Last weekend's incursion by the US navy within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit of Chinese-administrated Triton Island has increased the pressure on the Australian government to follow suit. The so-called freedom of navigation operation (FONOP), the second by an American warship, deliberately heightened tensions in the strategic South China Sea, provoking sharp condemnations by Chinese authorities.

The Australian government, which has been a key ally in the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China, immediately backed the US challenge to China's territorial claims. Defence Minister Marise Payne declared that Australia "strongly supported" the right of all states to freedom of navigation and overflight, including in the South China Sea. According to Fairfax Media, Canberra was informed in advance of last weekend's naval operation by the USS Curtis Wilbur.

The US clearly wants an Australian military intrusion in the South China Sea, so as to give the appearance of international unity to its provocations against China. Australia has significant military forces, which are closely integrated with those of the US, and has fought in virtually every US-led war and imperialist intervention since World War II. A similar operation by Washington's other key regional ally, Japan, would be particularly provocative, given the history of Japanese invasion and war crimes in China.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made a point of stopping off in Hawaii, on returning from his first trip to Washington as prime minister last month, in order to meet with Admiral Harry Harris, the head of the US Pacific Command. Harris is one of the most aggressive advocates of military operations in the South China Sea. He told the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies last week: "You will see more

of them [FONOPs], and you will see them increasing in complexity and scope in areas of challenge."

According to Murdoch's *Australian*, which is beating the drum for an Australian military intervention, a "freedom of navigation" operation is already under active discussion in government and military circles in Canberra. In a comment in today's edition, Alan Dupont, Professor of International Security at the University of NSW, declared that the "realists"—those advocating an intervention in the South China Sea—had prevailed.

Dupont, a proponent of confronting China, declared: "FONOPs should be conducted on a regular, not occasional basis, using our maritime patrol aircraft and frigates. If the point is to deliver a message to China then the operations can't be so discreet that no one knows about them, as has occurred in the past." In December, the BBC revealed that, behind the backs of the Australian public, military aircraft were already being flown close to, but not within, the 12-nautical mile limit around Chinese islets.

In a bellicose editorial last week, the *Australian* declared that Canberra "has no choice but to push back at China's bullying." Denouncing "China's expansive territorial claims" and "brazen expansionism," it insisted: "With two-thirds of our trade passing through the disputed area in the South China Sea, Australia has a legitimate interest in ensuring respect for international law in the South China Sea and it is imperative that, like the US, Australia demonstrates its determination not to be cowed by what are outrageous and legally indefensible territorial claims."

China's so-called expansionism in the islands is in response to the expansion of US military forces as part of the "pivot to Asia," which was formally announced by President Barack Obama in the Australian

parliament in November 2011. Washington has stirred up tensions in the South China Sea by encouraging the Philippines and Vietnam to more belligerently press their claims against China. Over the past two years, Beijing has reacted by expanding its facilities on reefs and atolls in the Spratly Islands, which were fewer in number and less developed than either of its rival claimants.

Like the US, which has never ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Australian government's invocations of international legality are completely hypocritical. While criticising China for not accepting adjudication by an international tribunal in The Hague, Canberra took precisely that stance in 2002 when it refused to recognise the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction in its maritime boundary dispute with East Timor. Instead, the Australian government brazenly bullied the small, impoverished state into an agreement that ensured Australian control of the lion's share of the Timor Sea oil and gas.

"Freedom of navigation" is a threadbare pretext to disguise US preparations for war with China. As Canberra and Washington are well aware, any threat to shipping lanes in the South China Sea would have all impact on China, which is heavily dependent on imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. The Pentagon aims to ensure control over waters close to the Chinese mainland. This forms a key element of its AirSea Battle strategy for a massive bombardment and naval blockade of China in the event of conflict.

In his comment today, Dupont falsely claimed that there was strong domestic political support for regular FONOPs in the South China Sea. In reality, the Australian population has been deliberately kept in the dark about the preparations for conflict with China. The widespread anti-war sentiment among workers and youth finds no reflection within the political establishment. As Dupont noted, "the government is unlikely to encounter much opposition from the Left" to any military operation in the South China Sea.

By the "Left," Dupont means Labor and the Greens. As he pointed out, Labor's defence spokesman Stephen Conroy has already demonstrated his party's militarist credentials by criticising Turnbull for not acting sooner to militarily challenge China. Following the US

intrusion last weekend, Conroy again accused the government of prevaricating. "I believe Australia and other like-minded countries also have an obligation to act in support of the rules-based international system in the South China Sea," he said.

As for the Greens—and their pseudo-left satellite groups such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative—their silence speaks volumes, as the government prepares a reckless military operation against China. In 2003, the Greens and the pseudo-lefts steered the mass anti-war protests against the US-led invasion of Iraq into the dead-end of futile appeals to governments and the UN. More than a decade later, they have backed the new war in Iraq and Syria, as well as US provocations against Russia in Ukraine. Having tacitly supported the US "pivot to Asia" over the past five years, the Greens and pseudo-lefts will also line up behind an Australian military challenge to China.



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