

Australian foreign minister echoes US demands against China

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Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop utilised talks with Chinese officials yesterday to echo the demands of the United States that China cease land reclamation and the militarisation of islands and reefs in the South China Sea. Bishop arrived in Beijing shortly after Fox News broadcast “exclusive” satellite imagery apparently showing the installation of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island—an island under Chinese control for 60 years.

Bishop described her discussions in Beijing as a “forthright and candid exchange of views.” She had foreshadowed the positions she raised behind closed doors in public statements made in Tokyo. Bishop spent two days in Japan, holding talks with the Abe government, delivering a major foreign policy speech and giving interviews to the Japanese media.

Following talks with Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida, Bishop told the media that she would question the motives behind Chinese activities in the South China Sea and insist on reassurances that “China does not intend to militarise the islands.” She also reasserted Australia’s position, supporting the United States, that it will exercise “freedom of navigation,” including by military vessels and aircraft, through the disputed territory.

According to various media reports, the Australian navy has drawn up plans for such an operation and is waiting for the go-ahead from the government. The Australian air force is already conducting operations near disputed islands that challenge China’s claims.

Bishop stressed the pro-forma position of the US and Australia that they do not take a position on the rival claims between China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia over areas of the South China Sea. Nevertheless she outraged Beijing by declaring that Australia recognised “the Philippines’ right to seek

to resolve the matter through arbitration.”

The United Nations’ Permanent Court of Arbitration, part of the International Court of Justice, has ruled that it has jurisdiction to rule on a Philippine submission—drawn up by top US-based legal experts—to have China’s “nine-dotted line” territorial claim in the South China Sea declared invalid. The case is currently being heard.

China has flatly rejected the legitimacy of any international court ruling over territory in the South China Sea where it asserts “indisputable sovereignty” and defines as “an area of ‘core interest’ that is non-negotiable.” In response to Bishop’s comment on the Philippines’ case, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson bluntly told journalists: “China will certainly not accept this. Australia ought not to selectively avoid this reality.”

In reference to Bishop’s statements on freedom of navigation, the Chinese spokesperson stated that Beijing hopes Australia would “not do anything to harm regional peace and stability.”

Australia’s endorsement of the Philippines’ action is particularly cynical given it refused to recognise the right of the same court to adjudicate on the division of the resource-rich Timor Sea between Australia and East Timor. Instead, Canberra pressured the impoverished statelet into accepting Australian control over the bulk of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves.

Bishop’s visit to Japan and China underscored Australia’s role as a key partner of Washington in its aggressive “pivot to Asia” and military planning and preparations for war. In response to Chinese statements recalling the role of Japanese imperialism in World War II and expressing Beijing’s “hope” that Australia would oppose any changes to Japan’s “pacifist” constitution, Bishop declared: “We moved on many

years ago in relation to both Germany and Japan.”

Bishop’s statement tacitly endorses moves by the Japanese government to rewrite the constitution to remove the clauses banning the country from possessing armed forces and waging war. Such clauses were rendered a virtual dead-letter decades ago by the establishment of Japan’s “Self-Defense Forces” as one of the most heavily-armed and technologically advanced militaries in the world, and by Japan’s support roles in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Last year, the government through legislation authorising “collective self-defense”—in other words, open engagement in Washington’s wars of aggression.

Japan is poised to secure its first major military export contract in decades, in the form of an Australian contract for between eight to twelve diesel-powered attack submarines worth an estimated \$50 billion. Japan currently has 22 Soryu submarines in operation in the waters along China’s coast and in the Pacific Ocean. Rival German, French and Japanese corporations are bidding for the contract, but it is an open secret that Washington prefers Japan, for strategic reasons. As part of the “pivot,” the US is actively encouraging the build-up and close integration of the military forces of its main regional allies, above all, Australia and Japan.

The submarine deal would cement an already burgeoning relationship between the two countries. While in Tokyo, Bishop discussed plans for an increase in joint military exercises and exchanges between the Australian and Japanese armed forces. She declared that boosting the Japanese military and its operations in the region and internationally was a “vital and necessary complement to the United States.”



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