

Labor Party steps up demands for Australia to “stand up” to China

James Cogan
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The Australian Labor Party has once again demanded that Canberra deploy naval or air assets to provocatively challenge Chinese claims over various islands and reefs. It has joined the outpouring of accusations by the US and its allies that China is “militarising” the South China Sea and threatening “freedom of navigation” by placing a missile system on Woody Island.

Labor, through its defence spokesperson Stephen Conroy, is acting as a catspaw of the US military establishment, which is applying its own pressure on the Obama administration to dramatically ratchet up military tensions with Beijing.

Conroy yesterday responded to the reports concerning Woody Island by condemning the Coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull for not yet joining the US in carrying out military intrusions into the 12-nautical-mile exclusive zone of Chinese-controlled territory. Conroy told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “It’s China that’s trying to claim a 12-mile limit, outside of the international system... The international rules-based system needs the people benefiting from it, needs the people who have the capability, to stand up and demonstrate that they are not prepared to be bullied by China in this way.”

The “international system” so passionately defended by the Labor Party is the strategic and military dominance of the Asia-Pacific by the US, from which its Australian ally has certainly benefited since World War II. Conroy signalled Labor’s active support for and encouragement of a military confrontation and even war with Beijing to maintain that dominance, declaring that Australia “should be prepared to defend the international system.” He asserted that the Australian military should violate Chinese-claimed waters unannounced, as it would be “foolhardy” to give

Chinese forces prior warning.

Conroy made his comments as Turnbull and New Zealand Prime Minister John Key fronted a press conference, where they faced questions about their position on the South China Sea. Both leaders, representing countries for which China is the major trading partner, publicly urged caution. Turnbull asserted all parties “had a massive vested interest in reducing tensions and not doing things, any measures, that would inflame tensions.” Key declared that “any blow-up of activities there would be very bad for security and economic issues in the region.”

Behind-the-scenes, however, there is mounting evidence that the Turnbull government has given undertakings to Washington that it will actively support further actions by the United States that are calculated to “inflame tensions.”

The *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) reported today that it was informed by “Washington sources” that the Obama administration has “said it would look favourably upon Australia doing more so-called ‘freedom of navigation’ exercises by water and air.” The AFR echoed earlier reports by the Murdoch-owned *Australian* that Turnbull discussed the issue with Obama and other US officials during his visit to the US last month, and with Admiral Harry Harris, head of the US Pacific Command, during a stopover in Hawaii. Visiting Beijing this week, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop conveyed Australia’s support for the US demands that China cease “land reclamation” and “militarisation” in the South China Sea.

In a separate column today, AFR commentator Lisa Murray wrote: “For the US, any move by the Turnbull government to take a more muscular stance on the issue would give its position credibility. It would make it not a battle about supremacy in Asia but the global trade

implications of China's activities." She concluded: "For now, Turnbull and Bishop are still trying to walk the tightrope. But at some point, Washington could ask for more from its ally and the balancing act may not hold out."

The Australian air force carries out continuous surveillance flights over the South China Sea, documenting the activities and movement of ships and submarines from all countries. Australian air force head Air Marshal Leo Davies commented to journalists earlier this month that such flights had been "slightly increased" in the recent period and that "nearly all" were challenged by the Chinese military if they came close to the exclusion zones around Chinese-held territories.

Over recent weeks, the Australian media has reported that the Australian Navy has drawn up plans for a "freedom of navigation" incursion and is simply waiting for the go-ahead from Canberra to set it in motion. The deployment of a Chinese missile system to Woody Island in the Paracel group may well be used as the pretext.

The purported missile placement is being cynically exploited to stir up a scare campaign. Peter Jennings, a pro-US figure who heads the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), has implied that passenger aircraft are in danger, "especially," he declared, "after the Ukrainian experience." Commercial airlines, he claimed, "would have to factor in that risk" and "would have to start thinking about diverting."

Fairfax Media took the remarks one step further by requesting comment from the Australian airline Qantas, Singapore Airlines and Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific. Rather than dismiss the question out of hand, Qantas replied that its flights "track well to the east of the archipelago." Not a shred of evidence has been provided for the incendiary suggestion that the Chinese military would shoot down civilian aircraft.

On another front, the US Navy has requested a revision to its Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea so that it sanctions military action against non-military vessels. Vice Admiral Joseph Aucoin of the US Seventh Fleet asserted this month in Singapore that changes were needed because China was using "what we refer to as 'white shipping,' cabbage vessels [cargo ships]" to confront intrusions into Chinese-claimed waters.

The Chinese government has continued to reject as "hype" the assorted claims about the significance of shifting a missile system to Woody Island. On Friday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hong Lei reminded journalists that it was US naval and air operations that had "escalated tensions" and constituted the "real militarisation of the South China Sea."

Woody Island has been under Chinese control since 1956 and used as a base for military operations for at least 30 years. It lies some 300 kilometres from the Chinese mainland and a major naval base on Hainan, and around 750 kilometres from major Chinese cities such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.



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