

Australian media use US admiral's comments to push for confrontation with China

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On Tuesday, Fairfax Media's *Sydney Morning Herald* devoted the top half of the front page of its print edition to a photo of visiting American Vice Admiral Joseph Aucoin, accompanied by a headline which asserted: "US naval commander urges Australia to carry out patrols in the disputed islands in the South China Sea."

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* no less sensationally entitled its article: "Send in the ships: US chief urges challenge to Beijing." The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) web site headline declared that the admiral "urges Australia to launch 'freedom of navigation' operation."

The impression conveyed by media was that the US, in the person of Aucoin, had made an overt intervention into domestic Australian politics, seeking to pressure the government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to join its American ally in sending warships inside the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around islets controlled by China. The *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed: "Aucoin's comments go considerably further than any US figure has done before."

In fact, Aucoin, the commander of the US Seventh Fleet based in Japan, was decidedly more muted. His comments at Monday's press conference were largely pro-forma. Echoing the Obama administration and his superiors, such as Pacific Command head Admiral Harry Harris and Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Scott Swift, Aucoin indicated that the US would continue to conduct provocative "freedom of navigation" operations around islands and reefs in the South China Sea claimed by China, regardless of the Chinese military's recent deployment of missile systems on Woody Island in the Paracel chain.

When asked if other countries should also conduct such operations, Aucoin, a senior but by no means top-

ranking commander, diplomatically replied: "Personally, it's up to those countries but I think it's in our best interests to make sure those sea lines remain open and I'll leave it at that."

Aucoin's only comment regarding Australia specifically came in reply to a question. A journalist, pressing for a more explicit statement, asked if those remarks "could be interpreted as saying it would be valuable for Australia to do freedom of navigation operations." The admiral answered: "Yes."

Aucoin's one-word response about Australia was not considered newsworthy by American armed forces publications, such as *Stars & Stripes*, *Navy Times* and *military.com*. Instead, they focussed on his remark that he would prefer the South China Sea tensions not to be "portrayed as US versus China" and his reassertion of Washington's now standard position that the US military "will fly, sail, operate wherever international law allows, including those areas."

The Australian media clearly decided to exaggerate Aucoin's remarks. The aim was to lend an air of urgency to a decision by the Australian government to order a military response to alleged Chinese activities in the South China Sea. To embellish its story, Fairfax Media's *Australian Financial Review* appears to have even put words into Aucoin's mouth, reporting that he—not a journalist—had said that it "would be valuable for Australia to do freedom-of-navigation exercises."

The backdrop to Tuesday's coverage is numerous reports over recent weeks, generally based on unnamed American sources, that an Australian "freedom of navigation" operation against China is imminent. According to the *Australian*, such action was discussed during Turnbull's visit to Washington and a subsequent stopover in Hawaii for talks with Admiral Harry Harris last month. Turnbull, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and

Defence Minister Marise Payne have each made recent statements endorsing the US operations and asserting Australia's "national interest" in "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. The Australian Navy has reportedly drawn up the plans to carry out a military incursion.

The Labor Party, led by its defence spokesperson Stephen Conroy, is at the very forefront of agitating for aggressive military action. Following Aucoin's remarks, Conroy again insisted that warships must be sent. "Instead of waffle," Conroy declared, "the Turnbull government should be clear about whether it supports Australia conducting a freedom of navigation operation as a demonstration of our support for the international system in the South China Sea." The "international system" is the new euphemism for the strategic and military domination of the Asia-Pacific by the United States and its allies.

If Turnbull does not order action, it will be taken in ruling circles, both in the US and Australia, as a signal that he is wavering on the commitments made under successive Labor and Liberal-National governments to fully support Washington's "pivot to Asia" and preparations for a confrontation with China.

However, the problem that faces not only Turnbull, but the entire Australian ruling class, is that public opinion has not been conditioned for the political shock that would be provoked in the event of a military clash between Chinese and Australian warships. Despite Australia's linchpin role in the US "pivot," a conspiracy of silence has surrounded the mounting danger of war throughout the mass media and the political establishment, including by the Greens and pseudo-left organisations. Apart from occasional commentary, generally buried deep inside the newspapers, little is written or discussed outside of specialised strategic circles. The tabloid press and television news generally report nothing at all.

The character of Tuesday's coverage is further evidence—on top of the Labor Party's bellicose statements—that a shift is developing in the political and media establishment. On the eve of an Australian operation in the South China Sea, the years of silence are giving way to a campaign of crass propaganda, in which China will be demonised as "aggressive," expansionist," bullying" and "threatening."

At present, millions of Australian workers and youth

would, if asked, oppose any action that could trigger the catastrophe of war—such as a reckless and provocative "freedom of navigation" mission to challenge Chinese territorial claims. Anti-Chinese hysteria will be used to try and mobilise support among more backward layers and to suppress the instinctive anti-war sentiment within the working class and among young people.

The campaign continues today, in the lead-up to the publication tomorrow of Australia's latest Defence "White Paper," which will define the "threats" to the "nation" and seek to justify hundreds of billions of dollars in new military spending. In a column in the *Australian*, Paul Dibb, a leading strategist and author of White Papers during the 1980s, wrote: "The way in which China is flexing its muscles and issuing threats means that Australia's defence policy has to consider how we would react, and what sort of forces we could commit, in the event that there were armed conflict between China and the US or, indeed, China and Japan."



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