

In Australia, US vice president issues belligerent challenge to China

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At a joint media conference in Sydney yesterday, US Vice President Joe Biden stressed the importance of the military alliance between Australia and the US, the history of shared involvement in wars and their joint commitment to blocking China's activities in the South China Sea.

Biden's trip to Australia, Washington's key ally in the Asia Pacific, came in the immediate aftermath of the July 12 arbitration court decision in The Hague branding as illegal China's activities on islets it controls in the South China Sea—a ruling that the US intends to exploit to confront Beijing.

The US vice president also arrived in Australia less than two weeks after the narrow return to office of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose government the Obama administration is pressing to join provocative US “freedom of navigation” military operations in the South China Sea to challenge China's territorial claims.

Biden's remarks, delivered at a media presentation with Turnbull after talks in Sydney, were bellicose. “Australia and the United States, we've had each other's back for a long time. We continue to have one another's back. And I assure you, the United States is going nowhere. The United States is here in the Pacific to stay. We are a Pacific nation. We are a Pacific power. And we will do our part to maintain peace and stability in the region.”

While couched in the language of peace and stability, the message was war-mongering. Biden said he and Turnbull “discussed the steps that Australia and the United States are taking so our troops can train more together and increase our interoperability so that we are fully prepared to respond to any challenges in the Pacific with a united front. It's important we stand together.”

This language points to escalating war preparations. Already, since 2011, when President Barack Obama visited Australia to announce, on the floor of the country's parliament, the US strategic “pivot” to counter China's rising influence, Australia has become a forward base for the US military build-up in Asia. Growing numbers of US Marines rotate through Darwin, and US air force bombers and naval warships make increasing use of Australian bases and ports.

Before meeting Turnbull, Biden visited Sydney's main naval base. On the flight deck of HMAS Adelaide, one of the country's two new large landing ships, he told the assembled crew that US troops had huge respect for Australians, because of their “Aussie grit” and “the fact you never, never leave anybody behind.”

At his media conference with Turnbull, Biden reiterated the “strong statements” issued by the US and Australia last week urging China and the Philippines to “abide by” the verdict delivered in The Hague. He said he and Turnbull “reaffirmed our commitment” to “maintain the free flow of commerce and trade in the air and on sea, making sure the sea lanes are open and the skies are free for navigation.”

Although China was not mentioned, Biden specifically referred to Chinese President Xi Jinping: “I'm often asked, whether I'm with President Xi in Beijing or whether I'm in Tokyo or whether I'm anywhere in this region—we are a Pacific power. The United States is a Pacific power. We are going nowhere. We are going nowhere.”

These statements are particularly belligerent in the light of Beijing's rejection of The Hague ruling, its declarations of intent to continue its activities in the South China Sea and its announcement of military exercises in the area.

The entire media conference was framed in terms of underscoring a military and wartime alliance. Turnbull began by stating: “We talked about a hundred years of shared service of our servicemen and women fighting alongside each other in freedom’s cause.” Australia had “no stronger alliance,” he declared.

Publicly, Turnbull offered no commitment to send Australian war planes and ships within the 12-nautical-mile zones around Chinese-controlled islets and reefs, but there is no doubt Biden pushed for that. Biden was accompanied at the talks by his South China Sea adviser Dr Ely Ratner and State Department assistant secretary for East Asia Daniel Russel.

Together with Japan, Australia is Washington’s major anchor point for a confrontation with China, and the US particularly needs Australian involvement in the South China Sea so that the conflict there does not appear to be a purely American one.

An indication of the behind-the-scenes discussion was provided by the *Australian Financial Review*’s Laura Tingle, who cited sources saying there were a “lot of conversations left unfinished” from Turnbull’s visit to Washington in January, during which he was pressed on the issue.

Tingle reported that the two governments were working on ways to “calibrate the brinkmanship” in the disputed waters. This would mean establishing “patterns of behaviour” that would see “an escalation in the number of patrols in the region to levels possibly not seen since the Vietnam War.”

While Australia has not yet joined the US in directly challenging China’s 12-nautical-mile zones, Australia’s air force chief yesterday emphasised that Australia already conducts frequent air and naval operations in the South China Sea. Chief Air Marshal Leo Davies said his forces had carried out 32 “Operation Gateway” flights so far this year. These “contributions” would continue to develop “working closely with our allies.” He said: “We need to send P3s and tankers and Hornets, naval ships.”

At the media conference, Turnbull announced an expansion of Australia’s participation in the US-led war in Iraq and Syria. Australian troops would train the police, gendarmerie and other security agencies of the US-backed regime in Iraq, as well as the Iraqi army. Australia already has 300 army instructors in Iraq, plus

80 special forces troops and an air force contingent of 400 air and ground crew carrying out airstrikes.

Biden welcomed Turnbull’s pledge. “Your folks are the best trainers in the world. Your special operations forces have come in, taken on the responsibility of training the guts and the core of the Iraqi National Security Force, their counterterrorism force.”

At the same time, Biden returned to a theme he repeated throughout his visit: that Australia benefits from US investment and trade, as well the military alliance. He spoke of two-way trade between the countries reaching \$60 billion last year and the need to “strengthen our robust economic ties.” During his three days in Australia, Biden addressed business leaders and spoke at Boeing’s Australian headquarters to underscore Australia’s considerable dependence on US investment.

As he has done previously, Biden conveyed a pointed message to those sections of the Australian corporate elite and political establishment that fear the potentially devastating military and economic costs of any confrontation with China, Australia’s biggest export market. Regardless of the consequences, Washington is demanding nothing less than an unequivocal line-up by Australia in reckless US operations in the South China Sea that risk conflict with Beijing.



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