

China issues warning to Australia over South China Sea

Peter Symonds
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The *Global Times*, a state-owned Chinese newspaper, last weekend published an editorial bluntly warning the Australian government against interfering in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Entitled “‘Paper cat’ Australia will learn its lesson,” the comment declared: “If Australia steps into South China Sea waters, it will be an ideal target for China to warn and strike.”

The editorial followed the July 12 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague supporting virtually all of the US-sponsored Philippine case challenging Beijing’s maritime claims, including China’s “historic” right to much of the South China Sea. Beijing, which did not participate in the court proceedings, has declared that it will ignore the PCA decision.

The *Global Times* branded Australia as “one of the most delirious countries” that “immediately supported the arbitration result and claimed China ‘must’ abide by it, and also signed a joint declaration with the US and Japan.”

The US-Japanese-Australian declaration was signed after a meeting on the side-lines of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Laos last week. While divisions among ASEAN members resulted in a vague joint communiqué that did not mention The Hague decision, the joint declaration insisted that the ruling was “final and binding on both parties.”

In remarks obviously directed against China, the three countries expressed “strong opposition” to any unilateral coercive action that could alter the status quo in the South China Sea. They urged all states “to refrain from such actions as large land reclamation and the construction of outposts as well as the use of those outposts for military purposes.”

For the past 18 months, Washington has mounted an

increasingly shrill campaign against Chinese “expansionism” in the South China Sea, citing land reclamation and “militarisation” in particular. The US Navy has conducted three “freedom of navigation” operations (FONOPS) by sending destroyers within the 12-nautical-mile limits of islets under Chinese administration.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi lashed out last week at the US, Japan and Australia, declaring that the issue was a test of “whether you are peacemakers or troublemakers.” He described The Hague ruling as a “farce” and berated the three countries for playing up “the South China Sea issue and regional tensions, targeting China.”

The *Global Times*, however, singled out Australia, pointing out its “inglorious history” in relation to Aborigines, and its hypocrisy in relation to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), under which the Philippine case was heard. It highlighted Australia’s territorial claims in Antarctica, which are not widely recognised internationally, and its manoeuvring in relation to UNCLOS on its claims to the Antarctic continental shelf.

“Australia showed blunt double standards as if no one had a memory of what it did and said over the Antarctic,” the editorial stated.

“Australia is not even a ‘paper tiger,’ it’s only a ‘paper cat’ at best... Australia has unexpectedly made itself a pioneer of hurting China’s interest with a fiercer attitude than countries directly involved in the South China Sea dispute. But this paper cat won’t last.”

The editorial is not an official statement but the generally hawkish *Global Times* is owned by the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) official organ, the *People’s Daily*. “I think the editorials of the *Global*

Times are not exactly the Chinese government's position, but in a way it does reflect the displeasure of the Chinese government," Shi Yinhong, a Renmin University professor, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Beijing is well aware that the Australian government confronts a dilemma in balancing between its largest trading partner China, and its longstanding strategic ally, the United States. In an implicit threat of economic retaliation, the editorial noted that Australia has signed a free trade agreement with China—just last year.

In the immediate aftermath of The Hague decision, US Vice President Joe Biden visited Australia and met with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, stressing the importance of the long history of Australian support for US-led wars. Undoubtedly behind closed doors, Biden put pressure on Canberra to mount its own "freedom of navigation" operations to intrude into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea.

The *Global Times* editorial is a clear warning that Beijing will retaliate economically and possibly "strike" militarily if Australia "steps into South China Sea waters."

The declaration is not only a measure of the extremely sharp tensions in the South China Sea but also of the political bankruptcy of the CCP regime. It is certainly the case that the prime responsibility for the dangerous situation in the South China Sea lies with Washington, which has recklessly ratcheted up its confrontation with Beijing to sow divisions between China and its neighbours. The US is recklessly inflaming flashpoints throughout the region as part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at subordinating China to the interests of American imperialism.

However, the CCP leadership is incapable of making any appeal to the working class in China or internationally. Instead, Beijing is on the one hand seeking to cut a deal with Washington while on the other whipping up nationalism and engaging in an arms race that only intensifies the danger of war.

The Chinese foreign ministry announced last week that China and Russia would conduct naval exercises in the South China Sea in September. While the two navies have held joint war games before, next month's operations are far from "routine" as claimed by

spokesman Yang Yujun. In the wake of The Hague ruling, the US could well seize on the opportunity to once again raise tensions in the strategic waters. Russia has backed China's claims in the South China Sea.

The CCP's more hawkish elements, such as the *Global Times*, recklessly suggest a more confrontational strategy, utterly indifferent to the potential catastrophe that a conflict between nuclear-armed powers could bring. An incident involving Chinese and Australian warships in the South China Sea, whether deliberate or accidental, could quickly involve the US and escalate out of control.



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