

Australia launches three-month naval tour, directed against China

Mike Head
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On September 4, the biggest naval contingent to leave Sydney Harbour for at least three decades departed for a three-month expedition throughout the Indo-Pacific region, headed by HMAS Adelaide, one of the country's two recently-acquired "amphibious assault ship" helicopter carriers.

Without any public consultation, the Turnbull Liberal-National government has launched a major naval display of force. It takes place amid the rising regional tensions generated by the escalating US threats and military build-up against China, particularly over North Korea and Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

While seeking to assert Australian imperialism's own predatory interests in the region, the mission is unmistakably designed to reinforce the aggressive anti-Chinese drive by Washington, on whose power the Australian ruling class has relied since World War II to pursue its regional hegemony.

By November 26, the task force group, labelled Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2017, will have conducted exercises with military forces from "Australia's key regional partners." These include the US, Brunei, Cambodia, the Federated States of Micronesia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand and East Timor.

The flagship, HMAS Adelaide, will be accompanied at various stages of the deployment by four guided missile frigates—HMAS Melbourne, HMAS Darwin, HMAS Toowoomba and HMAS Parramatta, and a fuel tanker, HMAS Sirius. More than 1,200 naval, army, airforce and civilian personnel will participate.

In an official statement, Defence Minister Marise Payne emphasised it was "the biggest coordinated task group deployment since the early 1980s." There was little coverage in the corporate media, however, which is continuing a pattern of covering up or downplaying Australia's preparations for war. The entire establishment

is acutely aware of the widespread popular opposition to the escalating militarism.

For similar reasons, Payne sought to portray the expedition as innocuous. She said activities like Indo-Pacific Endeavour "generated personal relationships, shared experiences and common understanding with our regional partners that could be crucial to success in times of uncertainty or crisis."

Nevertheless, Payne directly linked the mission to key phrases used by Washington to accuse China of lawlessness, aggression and expansionism. "Maintaining the rule of law and respecting the sovereignty of nations large and small is fundamental to continued peace and stability in our region," she said.

Payne did not specify whether the exercises would include provocative "freedom of navigation" intrusions into the 12-nautical-mile territorial zones around fortified Chinese reefs. But she did refer specifically to exhibiting Australia's war-fighting capacity.

"The Joint Task Group will demonstrate the ADF's [Australian Defence Force] ability to operate across the full spectrum of military operations, from high-end military capabilities such as anti-submarine warfare to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief," Payne said.

The defence minister announced the mission just before travelling to South Korea, where she indicated Canberra's readiness to again join a US-led war on the Korean peninsula, as it did during the 1950-53 Korean War.

Payne then went to the Philippines to announce that more Australian Special Forces troops would be sent to the southern province of Mindanao, under the guise of combatting alleged Islamic State-linked fighters. Australian participation was requested by Washington to pressure Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to step back from forging closer ties to China.

As if to reinforce the message, the Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2017 task force's "first international

engagement activity,” announced on September 8, was to conduct “aviation training” with the USS Bonhomme Richard, a large amphibious assault ship aircraft carrier, off the east coast of Australia. In a media release, Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2017 commander Captain Jonathan Earley said: “Successful activities like this highlight the continued enhancement of interoperability between the two militaries.”

The expedition has not gone unnoticed in Beijing. A comment in the *People’s Daily*, the government’s premier media outlet, accused Australia of seeking to “encircle” China. “Excluding Vietnam, the Australian Army fleet will visit almost all countries across the South China Sea and the East China Sea that surround China,” the article noted. “What does it mean that Australia’s military exercise route is ‘encircling’ China?”

Australia was conducting the exercises to assist the US, the article commented. It quoted a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences academic, Gao Cheng, who agreed with a recent Chinese media cartoon ridiculing Australia as a “loudspeaker” set up in the Asia Pacific by a US radio station. “It works very hard and is very proud, but it is becoming more and more like noise in the area,” the article asserted.

Gao “further pointed out that Australia belongs to the ‘first echelon’ in the Asia-Pacific region in its support for the United States,” the article reported. “It often acts as the ‘assistant police’ for the United States in the region.”

The Beijing regime is using the aggressive conduct of the Trump administration, and the frontline support given to it by the Australian ruling class, to whip up nationalist sentiment for its own repressive domestic political purposes. In doing so, it is also playing into Washington’s war-mongering hands and dividing Chinese workers from their fellow workers in America and Australia.

At the same time, Beijing is making a pitch to elements within the Australian political establishment who reflect the interests of sections of business that depend heavily on China economically, particularly as an export market.

The commentary observed: “The United States is Australia’s most important ally. China is Australia’s most important trading partner. Australia faces a tough problem trying to balance between these two, but time has proven that, as a ‘hardcore’ ally of the US, it is difficult for Australia to get rid of the United States’ political influence.”

It is not an accident that the Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2017 war games follow a succession of visits to Australia this year by high-ranking US political and military-

intelligence figures, notably Senate Armed Services chairman John McCain, Vice President Mike Spence and former National Intelligence director James Clapper. Their blunt warning to the Turnbull government and the entire parliamentary elite was not to “bet against America,” regardless of public hostility toward the Trump administration.

This line was reinforced this week, when Dennis Richardson, a former Australian intelligence chief, head of the defence and foreign affairs departments and ambassador to the US, delivered a speech in Washington. At a forum conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Pentagon-linked think tank, Richardson warned against using President Donald Trump’s unpopularity to “strip away credibility and confidence” in an alliance that he described as the bedrock of Australia’s national security.

Richardson’s remarks were highlighted in a September 14 editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, which declared that any political figure who called for distance from the Trump administration “would do well to heed Mr Richardson’s trenchant defence of the alliance and the access it provides to the Five Eyes strategic intelligence network.”

Not a word of criticism of the naval expedition has been uttered by any member of the political establishment, not least Labor or the Greens, which were in the forefront of support for the Obama administration’s military and strategic “pivot to Asia,” directed against China—a turn now being intensified by the Trump White House.



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