

Australian and Chinese navy ships reportedly face off in the South China Sea

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As tensions heighten between the US and China, an encounter between Australian and Chinese naval vessels reportedly occurred on April 15. Though both sides disputed the facts of the event, international media outlets gave it prominent coverage, depicting it as a “Chinese challenge” to Australian warships.

From the limited details provided in media and government statements, it appears that Chinese naval forces approached three Australian warships as they transited from the Philippines to Vietnam to participate in joint training exercises with Vietnamese forces. The encounter occurred when the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was conducting large military exercises in the South China Sea.

The precise course of the Australian ships remains unclear, and whether this would have brought them near Chinese exercises or military facilities, prompting the PLAN to engage them, is unknown.

No information has been provided on the actual interaction between the ships. The Australian Defence Department refused to answer any questions, saying only that communication between the ships was “polite but robust.” However, the Australian Defence Force did confirm the identities of the ships involved—the frigates HMAS Anzac and HMAS Toowoomba, and the resupply ship HMAS Success.

Australian government officials have been similarly tight-lipped. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull refused to confirm any details of the incident while insisting that Australia had every right to conduct “freedom of navigation operations and overflight operations”—a phrase used by the US to refer to challenges to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Other government figures echoed this sentiment, including Minister for Defence Industry Christopher Pyne, who said the encounter was routine and media

reports had been “exaggerated.”

The Chinese Defence Ministry disputed the Australian accounts of the incident as “different from the facts,” but did not provide any further information, other than to say that PLAN ships had “robustly” challenged the Australian vessels. The implication of the statement is that the Australian ships had in some way neared territory claimed by China.

Australia has not officially conducted US-style freedom of navigation operations within the 12-mile exclusion zones of various islets claimed by China in the South China Sea. Accusing China of “militarising the South China Sea,” the US has used these operations to directly challenge Chinese holdings.

Such military provocations are reckless and risk triggering war between the US and China. Nevertheless, the US has continued these operations, conducting one barely more than a month ago.

The US is not even a signatory to the international maritime laws it quotes against China. Additionally, other countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, control similar numbers of islands to China in the region, undermining the claims about “Chinese expansionism” propagated by the US and its allies.

Washington has also asked Australia to conduct similar operations, in order to lend its actions a veneer of legitimacy. Those making such calls include the recently-named US ambassador to Australia, Admiral Harry Harris, who is a hawkish advocate of increased military action against China.

There has been no evidence presented by either the Australian or Chinese authorities to confirm or deny that a freedom of navigation operation was underway when the Australian ships were approached.

There are fears within the Australian ruling elite, particularly among mining, agricultural and education

businesses, that China, their largest trading partner, may retaliate economically to such provocations.

Nevertheless, major media outlets, especially in Australia and the US, have portrayed the event in the South China Sea as a substantial military confrontation. In Australia, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Murdoch-owned media both ran headlines such as: “Australian warships challenged by Chinese military in South China Sea.” The *Washington Post* was equally inflammatory in its rhetoric, with its article on the incident titled: “Australia won’t abandon S. China Sea patrols after encounter.”

Whatever the true events or motives behind the face off in the South China Sea, the attention paid to it by the media reflects the growing tensions in the region. As a result, an incident that in previous years would have been treated as a trivial encounter between two navies became world news.



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