

Australia joins “Quad” military exercises directed against China

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21 October 2020

Acting, in effect, as a spearhead of the escalating US confrontation with China, the Australian government on Monday announced three provocative intensifications of military partnerships unmistakably aimed against Beijing.

The first was to accept an Indian government invitation to participate in November’s annual Malabar naval exercise off India’s eastern coast, joining the US and Japan. This signals the stepping up of the “Quadrilateral” alliance between the four countries.

The second announcement, made from Tokyo, was a commitment to negotiate a new agreement with Japan allowing that country’s military to “protect Australian Defence Force assets” if they come under threat.

Thirdly, Australian Defence Minister Linda Reynolds and her Japanese counterpart, Kishi Nobuo, also revealed in Tokyo that vessels from the two countries had joined US warships in sailing through the South China Sea, potentially close to Chinese-held islets.

Taken together, these moves mark further preparations for a US-instigated war against China.

None of the announcements explicitly named China as the target, but they flowed from a meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the US, India, Japan and Australia, held in Tokyo on October 6. There US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo again demonised Beijing, falsely blaming it for the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Pompeo declared that “Quad” collaboration was more critical than ever to protect against Beijing’s “exploitation, corruption, and coercion.” He named the South China Sea, along with “the East China Sea, the Mekong, the Himalayas, the Taiwan Straits” as “just a few examples” of China’s alleged aggression.

The truth is that the Trump administration has deliberately inflamed these flashpoints, including by

recently encouraging the right-wing Indian government to take an aggressive stance in its volatile border clashes with China. This has taken to a new level the anti-China “pivot to Asia” conducted by the Obama White House.

Pompeo’s push in Tokyo was part of a US drive for the transformation of the “Quad” into a formal military alliance. Monday’s announcements are another step in that direction.

Announcing the Malabar invitation, Australia’s Reynolds declared: “High-end military exercises like MALABAR are key to enhancing Australia’s maritime capabilities, building interoperability with our close partners, and demonstrating our collective resolve to support an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific.”

Echoing Pompeo, Reynolds said the Malabar exercise “also showcases the deep trust between four major Indo-Pacific democracies and their shared will to work together on common security interests.”

How closely these developments relate to war preparations was underscored by the Tokyo announcements.

Kishi and Reynolds said they had instructed their officials to “commence necessary coordination to create a framework to protect Australian Defence Force assets by the SDF [Japan’s military “Self-Defence Forces”] personnel.”

This raises the scenario of Japanese forces backing Australia’s military in the face of supposed threats from China.

Kishi and Reynolds said the arrangement would be covered by “Article 95-2 of the SDF Law (Provision for the protection of weapons and other equipment of the units of the U.S. Armed Forces and armed forces of other foreign countries).”

This SDF law, enacted by the Japanese government

in 2015 in the face of widespread popular opposition, allows the Japanese military to conduct armed warfare internationally for the first time since World War II, by providing support to allies engaged in combat.

Kishi and Reynolds further stated: “In this context, we would like to announce that vessels of Japan and Australia, together with the United States are going to sail in the South China Sea to conduct a trilateral exercise starting from this evening till early tomorrow morning, Japan time.”

As yet, it is not known whether this operation included entering territorial waters claimed by China, as US warships have done increasingly.

While not naming China, the two defence ministers issued a series of incendiary allegations against Beijing, any one of which could provide the pretext for US-led military action. They declared “strong opposition to any destabilising or coercive unilateral actions” in the region, as well as to “militarisation of disputed features” and “efforts to disrupt other countries’ resource exploitation activities.”

Kishi and Reynolds committed their governments to intensifying their military collaboration, featuring “maritime activities in the South China Sea” and “increasing the complexity and sophistication of bilateral exercises and operations, including testing of air-to-air refuelling.”

US-aligned commentators in Australia hailed these moves. In the Murdoch media, Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the *Australian*, noted: “Joint naval exercises such as Malabar do not equate to a military pact. However, they are extremely useful. They do signal to Beijing that the region is capable of serious military co-operation.”

In its editorial, the *Australian* further stoked the anti-China witch hunt: “After an absence of 13 years, Australia’s return to the annual Malabar naval exercise is significant and welcome. The exercise has assumed crucial importance for the security of the Indo-Pacific region at a time of unrelenting Chinese belligerence.”

In 2008, Australia’s Rudd Labor government pulled out of the Quad, in an attempt to straddle to some extent between the US, Australia’s post-World War II military ally, and China, the country’s biggest export market. Rudd remained fully committed to the US alliance but the balancing act triggered his removal as prime minister in 2010, orchestrated by US “protected

sources” inside the Labor Party.

Over the past decade, US governments have pressured India also into becoming a frontline state in the conflict with China. India effectively entered into a strategic partnership with Washington in 2010 that has been expanded to include a logistics and basing agreement.

Figures within India’s ruling establishment drew attention to the sweeping implications of the line-up against China. Pankaj Jha, former deputy director of India’s National Security Council Secretariat, told *Nikkei Asia* the involvement of the full Quad demonstrated the Malabar naval exercises “are going up a level.”

“In past editions, we have seen sophisticated anti-submarine warfare, surveillance aircraft and reconnaissance aircraft all being deployed,” Jha said. “Now when Australia also comes in, and there are logistics support agreements, it technically means the expanse of the Quad is superimposed on two regions: the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.”

Beijing’s initial response to the Malabar announcement was muted, reflecting the regime’s bid to head off a direct clash with the US. “We have taken note of this development,” China’s foreign affairs spokesman Zhao Lijan told a regular press conference in Beijing on Tuesday. “We always believe military co-operation between countries should be conducive to regional peace and stability.”

Regardless of such diplomatic niceties, the tightening encirclement of China itself heightens the danger of another world war. The US ruling class is intent on blocking China from ever becoming a challenge to American global hegemony. In a warning of what is to come, both the Democrats and Republicans have ratcheted up their anti-China propaganda in the US presidential election campaign.



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