

# Australian government accuses China of “aggression” over naval laser incident

Mike Head  
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In the most provocative manner, the Liberal-National government—backed to the hilt by the Labor Party opposition—has charged China with “aggression,” “intimidation” and “bullying” after a Chinese naval vessel reportedly pointed a laser at an Australian surveillance plane.

All the circumstances and timing surrounding the incident point to Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his Labor counterpart Anthony Albanese rushing to make deliberately incendiary allegations against China. There is a bipartisan ratcheting up of an increasingly frenzied anti-China witch-hunt, driven by a deepening domestic political crisis and an escalating US-led confrontation against Russia, which is also directed against China.

Without providing any evidence to back his charge, Morrison branded the mere pointing of a laser rangefinder at the patrol spy plane as an “act of intimidation” that could have killed the flight crew. Australia, he declared, would never accept such acts of intimidation.” It was “unprovoked” and “unwarranted” and “Australia stands up to coercion, bullying and intimidation.”

Labor leader Albanese was no less frothing. He labelled the incident an “outrageous act of aggression.” He broadened the charge to accuse China of being “engaged in much more aggressive activity of which we have seen this latest report has been just one example.”

As always with such war-mongering accusations, it is necessary to examine the facts carefully, and then place them in an historical perspective.

The incident occurred at 1.35 p.m. on February 17 as two Chinese vessels—a destroyer accompanying an amphibious transport dock ship—were transiting through international waters in the Arafura Sea, which is located between Australia and Indonesian West Papua.

This sea is part of an important global shipping route between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Yet the two Chinese craft were subjected to five days of tracking and observation by Australian aircraft and warships, starting off the southern coast of Java.

According to the official account provided by the Australian Defence Department, “a P-8A Poseidon detected a laser illuminating the aircraft” from a Chinese vessel. This was a “serious safety incident.” Yet no details or photo imagery were provided, not even to identify which ship was involved or specify how close the Australian air force surveillance plane came to it.

All modern warships are equipped with lasers. These are used to determine the distance of nearby objects, although they can be used to ascertain firing ranges for targeting purposes. In less than 48 hours, however, the Australian Defence statement was issued without the pretence of any investigation or clarification with Chinese authorities, and Morrison and Albanese seized upon it to accuse China of a major provocation.

China’s response rebuked these claims. Australia’s statement was completely inconsistent with the facts, Senior Colonel Tan Kefei, a spokesperson of China’s Ministry of National Defense, stated on Monday. He said the Australian aircraft had flown “very close” to the Chinese vessels—within four kilometres—and provocatively dropped a sonar buoy into the water, citing photos taken on board the Chinese ships.

Sonar buoys can be used to gather acoustic information and help detect submarines. An image released by China’s national defence ministry showed a triangular orange buoy in the water.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said Australia should “stop maliciously disseminating China-related disinformation.” Wang added: “The normal navigation of Chinese vessels on the high seas is in line with relevant international law and international practice and completely legal and legitimate.”

Significantly, Morrison quickly sought to draw other US-aligned powers into the affair, saying other countries such as the US, UK, Japan, France and Germany would also be alarmed by China’s actions. So far, Japan has said it is “fully behind Australia on this matter.” Noticeably, however, the two other countries bordering the Arafura Sea,

Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, have made no comment.

Thus, the affair has all the hallmarks of a provocation by the Australian government, seeking to further stoke the confrontation against China, which the US regards as the prime threat to its global dominance.

The accusations against China came hard on the heels of a fortnight-long parliamentary session—with a federal election looming—that saw unprecedented attacks by Morrison and his ministers on the Labor Party, virtually accusing its leaders of being treasonous agents of China. In reply, Albanese and his shadow ministers doubled down on their own charges against China and their total bipartisan commitment to the US military alliance.

As the WWSWS explained, the hysterical character of the accusations is the result of two inter-related developments. One is Washington's intensifying preparations for war against both Russia and China and its demand that the Australian ruling elite play a frontline and confrontational role, particularly against China.

The other factor is the unravelling of Morrison's government, which is responsible for an ongoing toll of COVID-19 infections and death. Riddled by factional infighting, it confronts collapsing approval ratings and rising working-class unrest over falling pay and shocking conditions—from nurses and teachers to rail workers—despite the efforts of Labor and the trade unions to contain and stifle the discontent.

Morrison's charges of Chinese "aggression" came after Defence Minister Peter Dutton, who is jockeying against Treasurer Josh Frydenberg to replace Morrison, declared that China had committed "aggressive, bullying acts" against Australia.

Speaking on Sky News on Sunday, Dutton said the attack was "very aggressive" and Australia would work closely with its allies to respond. He declared that "the alliance" between China and Russia was "deeply concerning." Dutton issued an inflammatory threat: "Russia does need to understand, as does China, that there is a price to pay for those acts of aggression."

All the government and Labor accusations against China have been uncritically accepted and broadcast throughout the corporate media. Not one critical question has been asked about the facts and background of the Arafura Sea incident.

Instead, the affair has been exploited to ratchet up demands for a massive increase in military spending in preparation for war. A February 20 editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian* praised Albanese for supporting the government's stand, but said "trading insults is not enough." A serious demonstration of military capability was needed.

The newspaper's foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who

enjoys close relations with the US-linked military and intelligence apparatus, produced a long list of the weaponry required. That included many hundreds of long-range missiles, and putting anti-ship missiles on offshore patrol vessels. Also "several more squadrons of fast jets," sophisticated drones, and "more warships." In addition, extra submarines to "urgently" deploy while waiting for the nuclear-powered attack submarines promised to Australia by the US and UK in last September's AUKUS pact, directed against China.

Sheridan provided no price tag, but it would run into hundreds of billions of dollars, which would require deep cuts to social spending and working-class living standards.

With the deeply unpopular Coalition government melting down, Labor is seeking to demonstrate to the ruling elite that it would prosecute this militarist agenda and could lead the country into war, as it did in World War I and World War II.

Over the past five years, Labor has backed every aggressive economic and political measure taken by the Coalition government against China. That has included banning Huawei Technologies from the country's proposed 5G broadband network in 2018, imposing severe restrictions on investment by Chinese companies, adopting criminal laws against alleged Chinese-linked "foreign interference" and agitating for a supposed "independent" investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in a bid to blame China for the global disaster caused by the profit-driven policies of every capitalist government.

This weekend, the WWSWS is hosting an international online webinar, "Fight COVID! Save Lives! Stop the drive to World War III!" to elaborate a political program to mobilise the working class against war and the pandemic. We urge our readers to register and attend this critical event.



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