

Australian government, media whip-up anti-China hysteria over murky encounter between military aircraft

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On Sunday, the Australian Department of Defence announced that a Chinese military plane had “intercepted” an Australian P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft over the South China Sea on May 26. This had resulted in a “dangerous manoeuvre” and a “safety threat” to Australian personnel.

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declared he had issued a protest to the Chinese government over the incident, but said he could reveal little about what took place. Other senior Labor MPs, including Defence Minister Richard Marles denounced Beijing, while the corporate media immediately went into hysteria over “Chinese aggression.”

The *Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan was typical. His first paragraph blared that the Chinese plane’s alleged action “was aggressive, reckless, dangerous, irresponsible, gratuitous and illegal. In other words, it was a typical act of Beijing policy in the Indo-Pacific.”

Similar assertions could be cited from all the major corporate publications and the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Not a single outlet has asked any of the obvious questions: Where exactly did this intercept occur? What was the Australian aircraft doing? Why was the incident announced ten days after it occurred? And where is the proof for the Australian version of events, including video footage?

The absence of even a shred of evidence, combined with the concerted government-media barrage, brands the interception story as a politically-motivated provocation. Whatever occurred on May 26, the frenzied response is aimed at ramping up tensions with China and justifying Australia’s increasingly

aggressive role in the Indo-Pacific.

The context makes this clear. On May 21, the Australian election was held, after a campaign in which both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition declared that it was necessary to “prepare for war” against China.

The first act of the incoming Labor administration, long before it had secured majority government, was to dispatch Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong to a May 24 Tokyo meeting of the Quad, the de facto anti-China alliance composed of the US, Japan, India and Australia.

There, the Labor leaders declared full support for the US drive to dominate the Indo-Pacific, after President Joseph Biden said his administration was willing to wage war on China if it moved to take over Taiwan.

Following the Quad meeting, the Labor leaders have been on a whirlwind mission in the region. Wong has traveled twice to the Pacific, threatening its leaders with unspecified “consequences” if they turn to China.

The purported intercept was announced the same day that Albanese and Wong arrived in Indonesia, for state talks aimed at lining Jakarta up behind the US confrontation with Russia and China.

Under conditions in which the Labor government has spent its first fortnight in office functioning as a US attack dog, the intercept story has provided it with the perfect opportunity to adopt the pose of an aggrieved party. On Monday, Albanese told the media in Indonesia that Australia had been the victim of an “act of aggression” and that his “strong representations” to China over the incident had gone unanswered.

The timing also suggests collusion with the US and its other allies. The Defence Department made its

announcement on the alleged intercept several days after the Canadian military issued a June 1 statement accusing a Chinese aircraft of violating international safety norms.

The supposed incidents involving Canadian military planes occurred as they deployed to the East China Sea between April 26 and May 26. The operation, which involved US and other allied craft, was ostensibly to monitor shipments that could have violated the crippling sanctions regime against North Korea.

The Canadian military statement accused China's air force of "buzzing" its surveillance planes, i.e., flying in close proximity and forcing them to change path.

The Australian allegations are similar. In the fullest account of them, Defence Minister Marles claimed that a Chinese J-16 aircraft flew close to the side of the Australian P-8 surveillance plane, before letting off flares. It then cut in front of the P-8 and released "a bundle of chaff, which contains small pieces of aluminium, some of which were ingested into the engine of the P-8 aircraft."

Again, Marles provided not the slightest evidence for these claims.

The Chinese authorities have pointed to this lack of evidence, together with the record of US-led provocations in the East and South China Seas.

An editorial in the Chinese state-owned *Global Times* on June 6 reported: "[D]ata has shown that from February 24 to March 11, Australian military aircraft have visited the East China Sea north of the island of Taiwan six times this year to conduct close-in reconnaissance activities."

A day earlier, a *Global Times* article asserted: "Warplanes of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) recently dealt with close-in reconnaissance and provocative activities by surveillance planes from Canada and Australia on China in the East China Sea and South China Sea respectively."

The article stated: "It is possible that the Australian P-8 was about to enter or even did trespass on Chinese airspace, or it is also possible that the aircraft disrupted PLA maritime exercises in a dangerous manner, analysts said."

It continued: "If the Chinese aircraft did use flares and chaff, it is possible that the Australian P-8 used its jamming pod to lase the Chinese aircraft, triggering the latter's self-defense system which is programmed to

automatically release the flares and chaff, Zhang Xuefeng, a Chinese military expert, told the *Global Times*."

The publication recalled a February incident, trumpeted by then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison as a major act of aggression. His government claimed that a Chinese naval flotilla had pointed a laser at an Australian surveillance aircraft in international waters off the coast of northern Australia. The Chinese military said that in fact the Australian aircraft had flown dangerously close to the Chinese vessels, as it dropped sonobuoys near them.

These murky incidents take place in the context of a more than a decade-long US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, which has now assumed the form of overt confrontation with China. Over recent years, the US has repeatedly dispatched naval convoys in "freedom of navigation" exercises near Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea. It has similarly sought to ratchet-up tensions in the East China Sea.

The Canadian and Australian accusations prove nothing. But they do demonstrate that, aside from the highly-publicised "freedom of navigation" provocations, the US and its allies are conducting continuous military activities throughout the Indo-Pacific, behind the backs of ordinary people.

To the extent that there have been "near misses" between US-allied forces and the Chinese military, it only underscores the enormous recklessness of what is being undertaken by Washington and Canberra. The US war plans have created the conditions where a miscalculation or an error could result in direct military conflict with China.

This underscores the urgency of building an international anti-war movement of the working-class against imperialism and all its representatives, including Australia's Labor government.



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