

Australia uses minor naval incident to condemn China for “unsafe and unprofessional conduct”

Peter Symonds
21 November 2023

The Australian Labor government, backed by the media, has provocatively inflated a minor naval incident involving Australian and Chinese naval ships in waters off Japan and China into an international diplomatic row. The latest unsubstantiated accusations against Beijing are part of a broader US-led propaganda campaign to vilify and heighten tensions with China in preparation for war.

In a press statement released on Saturday, Australia’s Defence Minister Richard Marles claimed that a Chinese destroyer had ignored communications from the HMAS *Toowoomba*, an Australian frigate, that it was engaged in diving operations. The Chinese vessel approached and operated “its hull-mounted sonar in a manner that posed a risk to the safety of the Australian divers.”

Marles condemned the action on November 14 as “unsafe and unprofessional conduct,” saying the divers were forced out of the water and “sustained minor injuries likely due to being subjected to the sonar pulses from the Chinese destroyer.” He claimed that the diving operation was necessary to remove fishing nets tangled around the frigate’s propellers.

The incident was immediately broadcast in the Australian, American and international media, hyping the threat posed by sonar pulses and criticising or condemning China’s “aggressive actions.” In Australia, Coalition opposition leaders seized on the event to demand that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese “come clean” on whether he raised the issue with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC meeting last week in San Francisco.

While refusing to comment on his discussion with Xi, Albanese told Sky News on Monday that the incident “was dangerous, it was unsafe and unprofessional from the Chinese forces.” He warned that such actions “do

damage to the relationship” between the two countries. Albanese said that his government had raised “these issues in the appropriate way and very clearly, unequivocally.”

Major American newspapers including the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* have reported the incident and the Australian accusations.

In a particularly inflammatory statement, Republican Senator Jim Risch, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared that China’s actions were “more than risky operational behaviour” and constituted “an act of aggression undertaken in international waters.” In a barely disguised call for a military response, he insisted: “Lines must be drawn and enforced.”

Other US allies have also weighed in. A spokesman for Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs told the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday: “Japan is seriously concerned about any acts that could increase tensions in the region, including this act, and is closely monitoring the situation.”

Philippines military spokesman Colonel Medel Aguilar told the *Australian* that the Chinese military’s actions were “really harmful and irresponsible.”

China has responded to the propaganda barrage by bluntly denying the Australian government’s allegations. On Monday, Defense Ministry spokesman Wu Qian branded the claims as “completely untrue” and urged Australia “to respect the facts, stop rude and irresponsible accusations toward China.” He called for the building of a “positive atmosphere for developing better bilateral relations and military-to-military ties.”

Wu said the Chinese warship CNS Ningbo had been “tracking, monitoring, identifying and verifying in accordance with the law and regulations.” He added: “The Chinese vessel ... kept a safe distance from the

Australian vessel and did not conduct any activity that could affect the Australian side's diving operations."

Details of what took place remain extremely sketchy. The allegations made in the statement by Australian Defence Minister Marles raise more questions than answers. In particular, it remains unclear where the incident took place and what the HMAS *Toowoomba* was doing.

According to Marles, the Australia frigate was "in international waters inside of Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone en route to commence a scheduled port visit." The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends 200 nautical miles or 370 kilometres from a country's actual territorial waters. In the case of Japan, it encompasses a vast sweep of ocean extending from its northern island of Hokkaido to waters adjacent to its southern island chain in the south near Taiwan.

Chinese commentators have pointed out that Japan's EEC overlaps with waters claimed by Beijing and no demarcation has been agreed. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning hinted that the Australian frigate was operating in waters off the Chinese mainland, saying: "We hope relevant parties will stop making trouble in front of China's doorsteps."

While Marles declared that "the HMAS *Toowoomba* had been in the region conducting operations in support of United Nations sanctions enforcement," its activities were far from innocuous.

The frigate was part of an Australian naval task force that included the destroyer, HMAS *Brisbane*, and supply ship, HMAS *Stalwart*, dispatched to East Asia as part of the escalating US-led military build-up against China. The task force involves some 500 naval personnel, helicopter teams from the Navy's Fleet Air Arm and command and support personnel.

According to the *Australian Defence Magazine*, the warships, which left in early October, were to "participate in a number of exercises and activities with regional partners including Canada, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States."

"This three-ship regional presence deployment showcases Australia's significant commitment to engaging with our partners in the Indo-Pacific region," said Commodore Mick Harris, Director General Maritime Operations, claiming it demonstrated "Australia's resolve for a stable, peaceful, resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Australian

operations are part of US efforts to strengthen military alliances and partnerships throughout Asia, boost multi-lateral war games and escalate naval and air force provocations close to the Chinese mainland. The long string of claims that the Chinese military has engaged in "aggressive," "unsafe" and unprofessional" actions are used to justify the continued presence of US and allied warships and warplanes thousands of kilometres from their territory.

The HMAS *Brisbane* took part in Japanese led Annulex naval exercises which began on November 11, alongside warships from Japan, the United States and Canada. The military drills involved the Philippines for the first time as an observer and were clearly aimed against China. The US, Australia and Japan have all strengthened military ties with Manila as its territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea have escalated.

As for the HMAS *Toowoomba*, its involvement in so-called UN sanctions enforcement is also a thinly disguised pretext for operating in North East Asia.

One aspect of its deployment was to contribute to Australia's Operation Argos to enforce UN sanctions against North Korea. While the UN Security Council voted for sanctions, it has not given its approval to the enforcement operations. These have been implemented by the US along with its allies, including Australia, Canada, France, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, and have resulted in the seizure of North Korean ships for allegedly "illegal" activities.

As the furore surrounding the incident on November 14 continues, the original pretext for the outrage in the Australian political and media establishment has been quietly buried. The "minor injuries" to the divers have never been detailed and Marles's office confirmed on Monday that they had recovered and returned to duty.



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