

Australian chopper and Chinese fighter involved in so-called “near miss”

Oscar Grenfell
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An encounter between an Australian helicopter and a Chinese fighter jet on Saturday has been exploited by Australia and the US to again ratchet up tensions with Beijing. Australian Labor government figures together with the corporate media have made inflammatory accusations that China’s military placed lives in danger and risked triggering an armed clash.

The incident is the latest of several “near misses” between Australian and Chinese forces. As with those previous encounters, the Chinese government has rejected the Australian version of events as a concoction. It has alleged that the Australian military conducted a provocation as part of the broader US-led military build-up to war with China.

In a statement on Monday, the Australian Department of Defence claimed that the HMAS Hobart naval destroyer had been undertaking “routine activities” over the weekend, as part of a US-led coalition enforcing United Nations sanctions against North Korea.

“During these activities, a Royal Australian Navy MH-60R helicopter launched from HMAS Hobart was intercepted by a PLA-AF fighter aircraft,” the statement claimed. “The PLA-AF aircraft released flares across the flight path of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) helicopter.”

In media appearances on Monday, Labor’s Defence Minister Richard Marles repeated the accusations and the Defence Department’s declaration that the Chinese actions were “unsafe” and “unacceptable.” He said he had made representations to Beijing along these lines.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese weighed in pledging to protest the incident directly with Chinese Premier Li Qiang.

The Biden administration also rapidly weighed in. US assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific

Daniel Kritenbrink, who is in Australia, declared the incident to be part of a pattern of a “more aggressive and assertive” Chinese military. The US and Australia, he declared, would continue to “fly, sail and operate” wherever they wished “even in the face of such activities.”

Media coverage in Australia has either uncritically repeated the government line or gone further complaining that the Chinese ambassador has not been “called in” and declaring that the relationship with Beijing is “not normal.” The media have generally reacted with hysteria to any Chinese naval activities away from its mainland, such as in the disputed South China Sea, not to speak of those anywhere near Australia.

The HMAS Hobart was in the Yellow Sea, which is some 6,800 kilometres from Australia. The sea is a semi-enclosed waterway between the Chinese mainland and the Korean peninsula.

The enforcement of punitive UN sanctions targeting North Korea is a threadbare pretense for military operations in airspace and waters close to the Chinese mainland.

In a press conference on Tuesday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jan said: “What truly happened was an Australian military aircraft deliberately flew within close range of China’s airspace in a provocative move that endangered China’s maritime and air security in the name of enforcing UN security council resolutions.”

Denouncing what he described as Australia’s “risky moves,” Lin said China “took necessary measures at the scene to warn and alert the Australian side.”

Yesterday, Chinese defence ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang added that the Chinese navy was conducting exercises in the Yellow Sea over

the weekend. He claimed that the “HMAS Hobart dispatched a ship-borne helicopter... three times to conduct close-in reconnaissance and disturb the normal training activities of the Chinese side.”

Unfazed, the Australian press claimed that China was “changing its story.” However, approaching Chinese waters and spying on activities by the Chinese military in those waters, are hardly mutually exclusive. The explicit purpose of the Hobart’s operations is surveillance, and given the proximity to China, there is no reason to believe such surveillance would only target North Korea.

Australian claims to be upholding “international law”—that is, US and UN sanctions imposed on North Korea—are highly selective. The US and its allies, including Australia, blithely dismiss statements from United Nations officials condemning Israel’s onslaught against the Palestinians of Gaza and calling for a ceasefire, instead continuing to back the Zionist genocide.

Whatever exactly occurred on Saturday, it is part of a pattern. Australian forces conduct activities far from Australian shores, and near their Chinese counterparts, under the leadership of the US. These operations occur entirely behind the backs of the population. They are only reported when an encounter occurs, which is then used to blacken China and accuse it again of violating the “rules-based order,” i.e., Washington’s rules.

Last November, Australia claimed that a Chinese destroyer had ignored communications from the HMAS Toowoomba, an Australian frigate, that it was engaged in diving operations. The Defence Department and Minister Marles declared the Chinese destroyer had used sonar, jeopardising the health of the divers, a claim Beijing flatly rejected. That incident occurred in or near Japanese waters.

In June 2022, Australia had asserted that a Chinese military plane “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. The Chinese branded the incident an Australian provocation.

These events have occurred under conditions of a further US and allied military build-up, explicitly targeting China.

Australia is being rapidly militarised, including the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines through the

AUKUS pact with the US and the UK. That is just part of a broader program, which includes vastly expanded US basing arrangements, including bombers and other strike capabilities. Australia’s own defence forces are being completely overhauled, with the explicit aim of preparing to fight a major war in the Indo-Pacific, above all through the acquisition of missiles and other offensive weaponry.

Washington is overseeing the consolidation of a string of anti-China alliances. It is actively stoking territorial disputes, particularly that between the Philippines and China over parts of the South China Sea. That has also included close encounters between Philippines and US allied military and Chinese forces.

The latest incident underscores the recklessness of this program, aimed at ensuring US hegemony in the region and globally. As the US is creating the conditions for a nuclear war with Russia in the Ukrainian conflict and backing the mass slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza, Washington and its allies are carrying out activities that threaten disaster in the Indo-Pacific.



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