

Chinese warships off the Australian coast trigger militarist outburst

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The announcement yesterday of a live-fire exercise by Chinese warships in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand has triggered an outburst of nationalism and militarism, amid hyperbolic warnings about the “Chinese threat” and demands for greater military spending.

The Australian and New Zealand navies have been shadowing three Chinese vessels—the frigate Hengyang, cruiser Zunyi and replenishment vessel Weishanhu, known as Taskgroup 107—as they sailed down the east coast of Australia in international waters.

Early Friday morning, the Chinese warships issued a notification of a live-fire exercise, prompting Australian authorities to establish an airspace protection zone of 19 kilometres around the Chinese task force and up to 45,000 feet. Reportedly two or three flights changed course to divert around the area.

It remains unclear whether any live fire actually took place. The New Zealand frigate HMNZS Te Kaha reported that the Chinese ships had deployed and recovered a floating target, but did not observe any actual firing on the target. It also stated that there was no indication of any surface-to-air firing.

None of this stopped outrage in the Australian media and political establishment. Defence Minister Richard Marles complained of short notice and that Australian authorities had not been directly notified. He said they had only learned about the exercise from radio warnings by the Chinese warships.

Foreign Minister Penny Wong raised the issue with her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi during a meeting overnight at the G20 foreign ministers’ summit in South Africa, also complaining about the lack of warning time. Before the meeting, she told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the matter had already been raised “at an official level.”

With federal elections due within months, the opposition Liberal-National Coalition seized on the incident to denounce the government for a “weak” response. Opposition defence spokesman Andrew Hastie branded the Chinese military’s exercise a “provocation,” declaring that Beijing was using “gunboat diplomacy to test US allies like Australia.”

“When will the prime minister and his defence minister stand up for the Australian national interest and insist on mutual respect from their Chinese counterparts?” he exclaimed.

The most frothing response came from right-wing commentator Peter Jennings in an article prominently published in the *Australian* entitled, “Anthony Albanese’s jelly-back spinelessness: China’s loud and clear message.” Jennings is director of Strategic Analysis Australia and was executive director of the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute from 2012 to 2022.

Jennings lashed out at Beijing, claiming it was sending an unmistakeable threat that the Chinese military would “fly and sail anywhere it damn well chooses” as well as “fire long-range weapons, gather intelligence and assert its presence whenever and wherever it wants.” As a result, “we will have no choice but to shut civilian aircraft routes near the danger zone... And, if we approach their flotilla, we run the risk of being greeted with hostile moves...”

Jennings’ chief immediate targets were Wong and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, whom he accused of promoting the “deluded nonsense” that the government had established a “stabilised relationship” with Beijing. “China wants submission from Australia, not stability,” Jennings declared, and called for Australia to prepare for war.

The level of hypocrisy in the rant by Jennings is

staggering. For more than a decade, successive US administrations have recklessly ramped up an aggressive diplomatic, economic and military confrontation with China in preparation for open war if Beijing does not submit. The new Trump administration has made no secret of the fact that it regards China as the main threat to its patriotic fantasy of “making America great again.”

The US navy, with the support of its allies including Australia, has steadily increased the number of provocative naval exercises in the South and East China Seas, and the Taiwan Strait, ignoring protests by China over the threat to its sovereignty and security. The US and Australia have engaged in increasingly frequent “freedom of navigation” and flight operations in the South China Sea to directly challenge China’s territorial and maritime claims.

Joint US-led war games in the South China Sea are also taking place more often. On February 6-7, American, British and Australian ships conducted a coordinated manoeuvring exercise, and a variety of other combined operations in the South China Sea. US Captain Justin Harts declared: “We will continue to reinforce our interoperability with our allies at every corner to maintain a consistent presence in the Indo-Pacific.”

The width of the Tasman Sea is around 2,250 km, nearly double that of the South China Sea. Moreover, none of the Australian commentators including Jennings, dispute the fact that the Chinese vessels were operating in international waters and according to international law.

By contrast, the purpose of US-led operations is precisely to challenge Chinese territorial claims, “fly and sail anywhere it damn well chooses,” and gather intelligence on Chinese military bases along its east coast, particularly sensitive submarine bases on Hainan Island in the South China Sea.

The one possibly correct point that Jennings made is that the Chinese exercise in the Tasman Sea was more likely aimed at sending a message to the Trump administration than to Canberra. “I doubt that Beijing cares at all about how Australia responds to its naval manoeuvring. Its assessment of Albanese’s jelly-back spinelessness is already factored in,” he wrote. “What China will be interested in is America’s reaction.”

A similar Chinese operation in international waters

off Hawaii or the American west coast would undoubtedly provoke a far more aggressive reaction from the fascist Trump administration, which is intent on expanding the American empire. The operation in Tasman Sea may be an indirect message to Washington to back off.

Jennings concluded by demanding that Australia conduct a Trump-like confrontation with Chinese warships, declaring: “Get some ships out into the PLA Navy exercise area. We have a ‘legal’ right to operate in international waters too. Why make it easy for the Chinese navy? Let’s at least show them that our navy can match it with them in skilful manoeuvres. Let’s raise the cost to Beijing, not give it a free ride to demean us.”

Jennings demanded a vast increase in military spending, on top of the hundreds of billions of dollars that the Albanese government has already committed, including to establish a fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines. “Currently the defence budget languishes just below 2 percent of GDP,” he wrote. “Spending should have been lifted to the old Cold War levels of 3 percent of GDP years ago. That must happen now and the focus of that spending should be on strengthening the defence force we have today.”

The comments of Jennings, who is closely connected in Washington, serve as a warning not of the supposed threat posed by China, but rather that powerful sections of the Australian political and military establishment recognise that the US under Trump has already ramped up the economic war and is accelerating the drive to war against Beijing.

Successive Labor and Coalition governments have already deeply integrated the Australian military into the American war machine and transformed northern Australia into a crucial base of operations for conflict with China. Jennings’s demand for a 50 percent increase in military spending—now—is another sign of just how advanced the war plans are becoming.



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