

Australia: Political row erupts over presence of Chinese warships

Peter Symonds
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As the announcement of an Australian federal election looms, the Labor government and opposition Liberal-National Coalition have been trading blows over the presence of three Chinese warships in international waters off the Australian coast.

The row erupted last Friday after the vessels—the frigate Hengyang, cruiser Zunyi and replenishment vessel Weishanhu, known as Taskgroup 107—announced a live-fire exercise in the Tasman Sea, between Australia and New Zealand, on February 21. It caused a number of commercial flights to be diverted. The following day a second live-fire drill was announced.

Amid the furore in the media and political establishment, no-one has suggested that the exercises were a military threat, that they were not held in international waters or that the Chinese navy had no right to carry them out.

Indeed, it is not clear what occurred. A New Zealand navy frigate that followed the Chinese task group did not observe any “live fire.” Rather, the Chinese ships changed formation, placed a target in the water, manoeuvred again and retrieved the target.

Amid the outrage in the media, the Australian Defence Force did not appear to be particularly concerned. It refused requests from airlines and the nation’s air traffic controller, Airservices Australia, to provide them with the coordinates of the Chinese vessels until after the second live fire exercise on February 22.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the office of Defence Minister Richard Marles had to step in and order the military to share the information, about 20 minutes after the Chinese flotilla had carried out its second exercise. The New Zealand frigate reported that one of the Chinese vessels fired a gun. No surface-to-

air missiles were fired.

Nevertheless, without providing a shred of evidence, the Australian Defence Force chief, Admiral David Johnston, upped the ante by speculating that a Chinese submarine could be accompanying the Chinese warships. “It is possible: task groups occasionally do deploy with submarines, but not always. I can’t be definitive on whether that’s the case,” he told a parliamentary committee on Wednesday.

While acknowledging that China had not breached international law, the Australian government protested, claiming a lack of adequate notice of the “live-fire exercises.” Foreign Minister Penny Wong raised the issue with her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi during a meeting at the G20 foreign ministers’ summit in South Africa.

The Chinese ambassador to Australia Xiao Qian insisted yesterday that the drills were “no threat” to Australia and were “a normal kind of practice for many navies in the world.” He said the notification of the drills had followed normal international practice. He also added that Australia and China are “comprehensive strategic partners,” in other words, “friends, not foes or rivals.”

In reality, Australian governments have sided with successive US administrations over the past decade and a half in an escalating a diplomatic, economic and military confrontation with China, which US imperialism regards as the chief threat to its global domination. In the process, northern Australia has been transformed into a vast base of operations for a war with China and the Australian military is deeply integrated into the US military machine across the Indo-Pacific.

That includes the AUKUS pact by which Australia is to acquire long-range nuclear-powered submarines and

other weaponry from the US and UK, at the cost of hundreds of billions of dollars, for use against China.

The Australian navy and air force have played an integral part in US military provocations in the South China and East China Seas, staging overflights and naval “freedom of navigation” operations in areas claimed by China. Australian forces also regularly take part in joint military exercises with the US and its allies throughout the region, including in waters that are strategically sensitive for China.

It is not at all clear from what has emerged so far when the Australian defence forces knew of the so-called live-fire exercise on February 21. According to what is claimed, the military only found out indirectly—after the drill had begun—following an alert from a Virgin pilot to Airservices Australia.

If that is to be believed, the Australian military, which had been following the Chinese task group in league with their New Zealand counterparts, did not bother to monitor the channel on which the Chinese ships alerted aircraft in the area to the drills.

The opposition Coalition has seized on the issue to poke holes in the government’s claims. Opposition leader Peter Dutton accused Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of “ducking and weaving on failing to answer basic questions” about when Australian authorities knew of the drills.

Opposition defence spokesman Andrew Hastie accused Albanese of “very weak leadership,” suggesting Albanese had misled the public by saying that the military had been notified. Hastie dismissed the fact that the Chinese warships operated within the bounds of international law, saying “they have a Blue Water Navy and they’re prepared to flex their muscles in our region.”

Hastie told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “We’re seeing a flotilla of three warships conduct live fire exercises off our coast. So, we’ve gone from wolf warrior diplomacy to gunboat diplomacy.”

Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy hit back, saying the Chinese warships had faced “the highest level of surveillance that you’ve ever seen from the Australian Defence Force for a cruise in international waters near Australia.”

Foreign Minister Wong condemned what she called the politicisation of the events, accusing the opposition of inflating the issue. “We now see gunboat diplomacy

being added to the litany of war talk from the opposition,” she said. “Such rhetoric does not make Australia safer.”

In the lead up to the election, the government and opposition are seeking to outdo each other on tough talk on “national defence” and bolstering the military. At the same time, both are mindful of the fact that China remains the country’s largest trading partner, underpinning the increasingly fragile Australian economy.

Neither acknowledge the utter hypocrisy of their criticisms of the Chinese warships off the Australian coast. The proponent-in-chief of “gunboat diplomacy” is US imperialism which, in league with allies such as Australia, routinely conducts military operations in the South China and East China seas adjacent to Chinese military bases in preparation for conflict with Beijing.

The three Chinese warships are reportedly heading west, after travelling around Tasmania and heading along Australia’s southern coastline—in international waters—in what appears to be an unprecedented circumnavigation of the continent.

The political and military establishment continues to exploit their presence to justify a further massive military build-up, which has nothing to do with “defending the nation,” but is part of the preparations for joining a US-led war on China.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review*, Jennifer Parker, a principal warfare officer in the Australian navy declared: “Recognising this vulnerability means Australia must develop the capacity to protect critical seaborne supplies in a crisis. It demands focus, structural reform, speed and investment.

“The 2021 announcement of AUKUS (our nuclear-powered submarine pathway), the planned surface combatant fleet expansion and the army’s move to adopt maritime strike are all crucial steps, but they aren’t enough. We must address the wider gaps in the fleet, and do it at speed.”



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