

Escalating US-China Tensions: Australia “Actively Considering” Dangerous Provocation in South China Sea

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Image: A pair of P-3 maritime reconnaissance aircraft over the Pacific. The Australian government is considering flying such an aircraft within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-claimed territory. Source: US Department of Defense

Amid escalating tensions between the US and China over the South China Sea, the Australian government is “actively considering conducting its own ‘freedom of navigation’ exercises near artificial islands built by China in disputed territory,” according to a front-page article featured in today’s Australian.

Written by the newspaper’s foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who is well-connected in defence circles in Washington and Canberra, the article revealed that what is under discussion is far more provocative than recent US military operations close to Chinese-controlled atolls. “The Royal Australian Air Force aircraft would fly within 12 nautical miles (22 kilometres) of an artificial island build by the Chinese, with Beijing certain to react,” Sheridan stated.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported last month that the Pentagon was drawing up plans for warships or military aircraft to enter the 12-mile territorial zone around a Chinese islet. The *Australian* article makes clear that Washington could be contracting out this reckless venture to Canberra, which has a track record of functioning as an attack dog for the US on foreign policy in the Middle East and Ukraine.

According to the *Australian*, the plans involve a P-3 surveillance aircraft that could possibly take off from the Butterworth air force base in Malaysia. Alternatively, “within a few months” an Australian warship on a port visit to the Philippines or Vietnam could “incidentally” breach “what Beijing considers its territorial waters.” Although the Australian warship HMAS Perth is currently in the South China Sea, the P-3 flight “is likely to happen more quickly ... as it is much easier to arrange at short notice.”

The article claimed that Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government had made no decision, but “such an exercise ... is considered very likely.” While unlikely to be, formally at least, a US-led operation, Washington is obviously heavily involved. Canberra has been in close dialogue with Washington over the South China Sea and was informed in advance of last month’s much-publicised US flight with a CNN news crew near Chinese-administered reefs.

The Obama administration may well prefer Australia or another ally to intrude within the 12-

mile limit and risk a miscalculation or error leading to an open clash or other forms of Chinese retaliation. Moreover, unlike Australia, the United States, although denouncing China's actions in the South China Sea as illegitimate, has not ratified the relevant international treaty—the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The dangers of war with China are now being discussed openly. In a *Time* article entitled, "The next step toward possible conflict in the South China Sea," retired US navy captain Bernard Cole said the chance of shots being fired stood at "better than 50-50." He suggested that the initial volley would more likely come from the Philippines or Vietnam—or, one could add, Australia.

The detailed behind-the-scenes planning reflects the aggressive stance taken by the US, Australia and other allies against China at last weekend's Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore. Echoing US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, Australian Defence Minister Kevin Andrews on Sunday called for a halt to all land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, highlighting China's "large-scale" activity in particular.

Andrews told the *Wall Street Journal* that Australia would directly challenge any declaration by China of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea. An ADIZ is not a territorial claim, but requires aircraft to give advance warning before entering the zone. The US responded to China's 2013 announcement of an ADIZ in the East China Sea by provocatively flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the area unannounced.

Andrews indicated that the Australian air force would ignore an ADIZ and proceed with flights in the South China Sea. "We've been doing it for decades, we're doing it currently ... and we'll continue to do it in the future," he said. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that "top US Navy and Marine commanders in the Pacific have been urging close ally Australia since last year to consider joining multilateral naval policing missions in the South China Sea," alongside Japan and the US.

In recent weeks, a drumbeat of condemnation of China has been rising throughout the Australian media and political establishment. Opposition Labor foreign affairs spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek urged caution so as not to further inflame tensions in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, she declared today that "it is important to have freedom of navigation and freedom of flight through an area that is an extremely busy trading route."

Commentary in Murdoch's *Australian* has been matched in the Fairfax Media by international editor Peter Hartcher, who entitled his article today, "South China Sea: The tiny islands that could lead to war." After referring to "a persistent idea" that it is not worth risking war between the US and China over "nothing more than tiny islands and useless reefs," Hartcher proceeded to argue that far more is at stake—key shipping routes, large undersea oil and gas deposits, and above all US supremacy.

"The US Seventh Fleet has been unchallenged ruler of the Pacific since World War Two. A fast rising China is now challenging," Hartcher wrote. "On the level of global governance, it's about whether there are any rules governing countries, or whether a country can get its way through use of force." He concluded by applauding Washington's provocative actions, saying: "The good news is that China's creeping invasion of the region is now being openly challenged for the first time by a country with the power to do something about it."

What is really at stake in the South China Sea is Washington's determination to maintain its

unchallenged hegemony throughout Asia—now central to global manufacturing and economy. Confronted with China’s economic expansion, the Obama administration initiated the “pivot to Asia”—an all-encompassing diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at subordinating China and the region to American interests.

If there is any force in the world that has wantonly and criminally sought to “get its way through the use of force,” it is US imperialism, which has waged one war after another during the past two decades to advance its ambitions. Now amid the deepening breakdown of world capitalism, the US, in league with its allies, is willing to risk war with nuclear-armed China to maintain its global dominance.

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