

Australia, Japan “Strongly Support” US “Pivot to Asia”, amid Rising Tensions with China

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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe yesterday in Tokyo expressed their “strong opposition” to China’s actions in the South China Sea and their “strong support” for the US military build-up or “rebalance” throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

While claiming to contribute to “peace and stability” in the region, the joint statement by two of Washington’s closest allies in Asia will only further inflame the region’s flashpoints and heighten the danger of conflict.

The two leaders met as the *Wall Street Journal* reported an American B-52 bomber last week flew within two nautical miles of Cuarteron Reef in the South China Sea. It is the second US military intrusion within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit surrounding a Chinese-administered islet in the South China Sea.

Pentagon spokesman Commander Bill Urban claimed that “for this mission, there was no intention of flying within 12 nautical miles.” However, whether intentional or not, the breach by nuclear-capable, strategic bombers directly into air space claimed by China is highly provocative.

The Chinese defence ministry said that two B-52 bombers had trespassed into its airspace on December 10, had been closely observed and told to leave. It branded this intrusion and others in the area as “serious military provocations” and warned that the Chinese military would take “all necessary measures” to protect China’s sovereignty.

In October, the guided missile destroyer, the USS Lassen, deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile limit around two Chinese atolls in a so-called “freedom of navigation” operation. Last month, two B-52s flew close to Chinese islets in the South China Sea.

The Japanese and Australian governments have both backed Washington’s reckless provocations. In their joint statement yesterday, Turnbull and Abe declared “their strong opposition to any coercive or unilateral actions that could alter the status quo” in the East China and South China Seas.

While not named, the statement was obviously targeting China. The two leaders called for a halt to “large scale land reclamation or construction” in the South China Sea and to the use of “any land features for military purposes.” They urged all claimants to “exercise restraint,” “ease tensions” and “act in accordance with international law, including the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight.”

The comments are fully in line with Washington's escalating campaign this year to demand that Beijing end its land reclamation. While condemning China for militarising the strategic waters, the US has exploited Chinese activities on a handful of small atolls as the pretext for stepped up naval and air patrols and encouraging its strategic partners to do the same.

Last week the BBC revealed that the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had flown a P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft close to a Chinese-controlled islet in the South China Sea. The BBC news team overheard the crew telling the Chinese navy by radio that "we are an Australian aircraft exercising international freedom of navigation rights". The Australian Defence Department later acknowledged the flight, saying it was "a routine patrol" that was part of Operation Gateway from November 25 to December 4.

There is nothing "routine" about these Australian air patrols. Since the USS Lassen incident in October, Washington has been pressing Canberra to take part in confrontational "freedom of navigation" actions in the South China Sea. Australian Defence Chief of Joint Operations David Johnston yesterday confirmed that the Chinese navy had repeatedly challenged the Australian aircraft and called on it to leave the area.

The repeated needling and humiliation of China by the US and its allies is putting growing pressure on Beijing to capitulate or respond. The Chinese-language version of an editorial in the hawkish, state-owned *Global Times* warned "Australian military aircraft" not to "test China's patience by flying close to China's islands... it would be a shame if one day a plane fell from sky and it happened to be Australian."

The Australian government has already made clear that its "freedom of navigation" flights will continue. Based on Fairfax Media sources, the *Sydney Morning Herald* today stated that "the tempo of such flights had been deliberately increased to signal to Beijing that Australia does not accept China's dubious territorial claims."

In Tokyo, Australian Prime Minister Turnbull gave full support to Abe's agenda of Japanese remilitarisation, declaring that Australia "welcomed and supported" the recent passage of Japan's controversial security laws and "proactive contribution to peace." The new legislation "reinterprets" the country's constitution to allow the Japanese military to engage in so-called "collective self-defence"—that is, to take part in US-led wars of aggression in Asia and around the world.

Since coming to power in 2012, Abe has expanded Japan's military budget, established a US-style National Security Council and sought to whitewash the war crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s. Japan's military strategy has been refocussed on so-called "island defence" in the country's southern island chain, adjacent to China, where Tokyo and Beijing are engaged in a rancorous dispute over uninhabited islets in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

Encouraged by the US, the Abe government is boosting anti-ship and anti-aircraft batteries in the southern island chain and will increase the number of military personnel in the area by about a fifth to almost 10,000 in the next five years. The *Guardian* today reported that Japanese officials for the first time have openly confirmed that the military build-up is aimed against China. Once the missile batteries are in place, Chinese shipping passing from the mainland into the Western Pacific will be within their range.

The Abe government is also engaged in aggressive diplomatic efforts to strengthen its ties

in the region and internationally. Prior to meeting with the Australian Prime Minister, Abe was in New Delhi last week for talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to boost economic and military relations directed against China. This week the Japanese and Indonesian foreign and defence ministers held their first ever “2 plus 2” meeting in Tokyo which again emphasised “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea.

In the space of five years, the Obama administration has transformed the long-running territorial disputes in the South China Sea into an explosive tinder box with the potential to spark a conflict between nuclear armed powers.

The recklessness of Washington’s actions is only underscored by the Pentagon’s declaration that the latest US intrusion into Chinese-claimed air space was “not intentional.” In the Middle East, the US wholeheartedly backed Turkey’s decision to shoot down a Russian bomber that apparently strayed briefly into Turkish air space last month. If China had done the same to last week’s B-52 flight, the world would now be on the brink of war.

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