

Red Sea Military Deployments on Behalf of Washington: Canberra Says No

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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The failure of the United States to convince the Australian government to send one vessel to aid coalition efforts to deter Houthi disruption of international shipping in the Red Sea was a veritable storm whipped up in a teacup. The entire exercise, dressed as an international mission titled [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#), is intended as a response to the growing tensions of the ongoing Israel-Hamas War.

Washington has made no secret of the fact that it wants to keep Iran away from Israel's predations by deterring any provocative moves from Teheran's proxies. But Israel's murderous war in the Gaza Strip is not exactly selling well, and a special coalition is being seen as something of a distracting trick. But even within this assembly of states, the messages are far from uniform.

France's Defence Minister, for instance, has [promised](#) that its ships would remain under French command, supplementing an already pre-existing troop presence. Italy's Defence Ministry, in sending the naval frigate *Virginio Fasan* to the Red Sea, [has its eye](#) on protecting the interests of Italian shipowners, clarifying that the deployment would *not* take place as part of Operation Prosperity Guardian. Likewise Spain, which has noted that EU-coordinated and NATO-led missions took priority over any unilateral Red Sea operation.

To that end, the Australian government has been unusually equivocal. In recent months, the tally of obedience to wishes from Washington has grown. But on the issue of sending this one vessel, the matter was far from certain. Eventually, the decision was made to keep the focus closer to home and the Indo-Pacific; no vessel would be sent to yet another coalition effort in the Middle East led by the United States.

The sentiment, as [reported](#) in *The Guardian Australia*, was that Australia would reduce its

naval presence in the Middle East “to enable more resources to be deployed in our region.” In doing so, Canberra was merely reiterating the position of the previous Coalition administration.

In October 2020, the Morrison government announced an end to the three-decades long deployment of the Royal Australian Navy in the Middle East. Then **Defence Minister Linda Reynolds** [revealed](#) that Australia would no longer be sending a RAN ship to the Middle East on an annual basis, and would withdraw from the US-led naval coalition responsible for patrolling the Strait of Hormuz by 2020’s end.

It was good ground for Australia’s current Labor Prime Minister, **Anthony Albanese**, to build on. In [his words](#),

“We’ve actually consulted our Australian Defence Force heads about these matters and with our American friends. That’s why you’ve seen no criticism from the US administration”.

When pressed for further clarification about the allegedly inadequate state of Australia’s naval capabilities, the PM simply affirmed the already guaranteed (and dangerous) commitment of Canberra to “the Indo-Pacific, a fairly large region that we look after” with “our American friends.”

The warmongers were particularly irate at the modest refusal. Where there is war, they see no reason for Australia not to participate. And if it concerns the United States, it follows, by default, that it should concern Australian military personnel and the exercise of some fictitious muscle. This slavish caste of mind has dominated foreign policy thinking in Canberra for decades and asserted itself in an almost grotesque form with the surrender of sovereignty to the US military industrial complex under the AUKUS agreement.

The Coalition opposition, displeased with Albanese’s decision, had no truck for diplomacy. Lurking behind their reasoning were script notes prepared for them by the US-Israeli concern that Iran, and its Houthi allies, be kept in their box. “Is Mr Albanese seriously claiming that Australia can assert diplomatic influence over the Houthi rebels?” [asked](#) the Shadow Minister for Defence **Andrew Hastie** and the Shadow Treasurer, **Angus Taylor**.

In the Murdoch press, two-bit, eye-glazing commentary on Australia neglecting its duties to the US war machine in distant seas could be found in frothy fury. Here is Greg Sheridan, [more cumbersome than ever](#), in *The Australian*:

“We are saying to the Americans and the Brits – under AUKUS we expect you to send your most powerful military assets, nuclear submarines, to Australia to provide for our security, but we are so small, so lacking in capability and so scared of our own shadow, that under no circumstances can we spare a single ship of any kind to help you protect commercial shipping routes – from which we benefit directly – in the Red Sea.”

The Royal Australian Navy, Sheridan splutters, is simply not up to the task. One of its eight ANZAC frigates is almost never in the water. The RAN is short of crews and short of “specialist anti-drone capabilities.” The implication here is evident: the government must, in the manner of Viv Nicholson’s declaration on her husband winning the football pools in 1961, “spend, spend, spend.”

Paul Kelly, another Murdoch emissary also of the same paper, [was baffled](#) about the “character” of the Labor government when it came to committing itself to the Middle East. The Albanese government should have been more bloodthirsty in its backing of Israel’s war against Hamas. It dared back, along with 152 other UN member states, “an Arab nation resolution calling for ‘an immediate humanitarian ceasefire’ – a resolution, given its wording, that was manifestly pro-Palestinian.”

What struck Kelly as odd, suggesting the glaring limits of his understanding of foreign relations, was that Australia did not commit to the coalition to protect shipping through the Red Sea because it does not have the naval capability to do so. But armchair pundits always secretly crave blood, especially when shed by others. And to have members of the RAN butchered on inadequate platforms was no excuse not to send them to a conflict.

Aspects of Sheridan’s remarks are correct: Australian inadequacy, the fear of its own shadow. The conclusions drawn by Sheridan are, however, waffling in their nonsense. It is precisely such a fear that has led the naval and military establishment fall for the notion that Canberra needs nuclear-propelled boats to combat the spectre of a Yellow-Red Satan to the north. With a good degree of imbecility, an enemy has been needlessly created.

The result is that Australian *insecurity* has only been boosted. Hence more military contracts that entwine, even further, the Australian military with the US Armed Forces. Or more agreements to share military technology that give Washington a free hand in controlling the way it is shared. In history, Albanese’s refusal to commit the RAN to the Red Sea will be seen as a sound one. His great sin will be the uncritical capitulation of his country to US interests in the Indo-Pacific.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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