

Australian Labor Party restates call for military challenge to China

By James Cogan
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Even as the United States and its allies ratchet up their militarist rhetoric and threats against Russia, there is no let-up in their campaign against China in the Asia-Pacific. Yesterday, the Australian Labor Party, the main opposition party, repeated its demand for Canberra to authorise the country's navy and air force to carry out military operations inside the 12-nautical-mile-zones surrounding Chinese-held islets and reefs in the South China Sea.

The Beijing regime has warned, via state-owned Chinese media commentary, that if Australia warships or aircraft do violate Chinese-claimed territory, it will be treated as an act of aggression and potentially trigger a military clash between Australia and China.

Labor's call for "freedom of navigation operations," or FONOPs, was made by its defence spokesperson Richard Marles at the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue. This year's annual conference of top-level figures within the Australian and American political and strategic establishment was held in Hawaii.

Labor's former defence spokesperson Stephen Conroy previously made the same demand several times, following three American naval FONOPs in Chinese-claimed waters in October 2015, on January 30 and on May 10.

Labor's position is intended to starkly contrast with that of the Liberal-National government headed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. No senior member of Turnbull's cabinet has publicly endorsed Australian operations that would violate Chinese claims in the South China Sea, and none have been carried out.

The US has also not conducted another operation since May, despite a vow by Admiral Harry Harris, head of US Pacific Command (PACOM) in Hawaii, that one would take place every three months.

Most notably, the US has not carried out a FONOP since the July 12 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in favour of a US-backed Philippines' case against China's claims of sovereignty over a number of South China Sea islets. The PCA declared China's claims were "without lawful effect" and its actions were in

"breach" of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). New Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte, however, has refused to aggressively seek to enforce the ruling and has instead sought to distance Manila from the confrontational US stance against Beijing, depriving Washington of its intended catspaw.

Under such conditions, the potential role of Australia looms larger. American admirals and generals have repeatedly said they would "welcome" a FONOP by an ally such as Australia to demonstrate that the US is not acting alone. Moreover, any incident between the Australian and Chinese militaries would enable Washington to portray a US action against China as coming to the aid of a "long-standing ally."

A series of developments, of which Marles' statements are only the most recent, indicate that major sections of both the US and Australian establishments are frustrated by the Turnbull government's refusal to order an Australian operation.

Following the Australian election in July, in which Turnbull clung onto office with only a one-seat majority, US Vice President Joe Biden travelled to Australia and delivered bellicose speeches against China, fiery calls for "freedom of navigation" and militarist paeans to the US-Australia alliance. Directly addressing those in the Australian establishment who have raised concerns about joining the US in a confrontation with China—Australia's largest trading partner and export market—Biden declared: "If I had to bet on which country is going to lead economically in the 21st century... I'd bet on the United States. But I'd put it another way: It's never a good bet to bet against the United States."

In 2011 and 2012, Turnbull was among the establishment figures who publicly questioned—or bet against—Washington's ability to remain the dominant power in Asia in the face of China's growing economic and geopolitical weight.

In late August, a ferocious campaign was launched in the Australian media, denouncing alleged "Chinese agents of

influence” within the country’s political and business elite. Labor Senator Sam Dastyari was forced to resign from Labor’s shadow cabinet because he had accepted payments from Chinese companies and had purportedly stated that Australia should remain “neutral” over the South China Sea disputes.

Within days, the Fairfax *Australian Financial Review* asserted on September 3 that Australian intelligence agencies—which are thoroughly integrated with their US counterparts—were “cynical” about Turnbull due his past business dealings in China and because, in 2011, he opposed the former Labor government’s “strategy of preparing for a naval war in the South China Sea.”

A September 6 column by Fairfax Media international editor Peter Hartcher called for a campaign to “eradicate” the pro-Chinese “rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows” within the Australian establishment and population. The September 7 editorial in the Murdoch press flagship, the *Australian*, accused Dastyari of “disloyalty” and labelled his positions on China as “anathema to patriotic Australians.”

A month later, the Labor Party is again intensifying the pressure on the Turnbull government—which would fall from power if only a handful of its members crossed sides to the opposition—to comply with US requests and order actions in the South China Sea that could provoke war with Beijing.

Marles told Fairfax Media: “Our view is very clearly that the ADF (Australian Defence Force), the Navy, should be fully authorised to engage in freedom of navigation operations... It’s important that in supporting the rule of law internationally and the rules-based order we do everything we can to assert that—that’s what a freedom of navigation operation would mean.”

A column in today’s *Australian* by its editor-at-large Paul Kelly—a prominent figure among the most pro-US layers of the ruling elite—lauded Marles’ positions. Its headline is “Australia must stand ground against Beijing’s expansion.”

Kelly asserted that the “backdrop” to Marles’ statements were recent declarations by Admiral Harris that the US “must be prepared to ‘confront’ China if the need arises.”

Kelly was referring to a September 15 speech by Harris in Los Angeles. In highly political remarks, the admiral hailed the US “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which was initiated in 2011 by the Obama administration and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in particular. Harris asserted that PACOM was “ready to confront” a “revanchist Russia and an assertive China.”

Kelly placed Marles’ call for Australian action against China in the context of the tensions between the US and the Philippines over Duterte’s threat to “break up” with Washington over its attempts to pressure him into a harder stance against China by criticising his murderous campaign

against alleged drug dealers.

Kelly also asserted there is an “open and documented difference in appreciation and tactics between the Washington-based Obama administration and the Honolulu-based US Pacific Command”—presumably because the US has not conducted a FONOPs since May.

Whether or not there are such tactical divisions, there is no question that the strategy of US imperialism is to shatter the ability of the Chinese regime to economically, politically or militarily challenge American global dominance—by means of war if necessary. Harris’s speech made that clear. The admiral declared: “If we have to fight tonight, I don’t want it to be a fair fight. If it’s a knife fight, I want to bring a gun. If it’s a gun fight, I want to bring in the artillery... and all of our partners with their artillery.”

Australia is arguably the most integrated US “partner” in Asia-Pacific.

Parallel with Marles’ call for military actions against China, senior Labor Party figures have delivered speeches ahead of the 75th anniversary of a December 1941 speech by Labor Prime Minister John Curtin. With the outbreak of the Pacific War with Japan, Curtin declared that “free of any pangs of loyalty,” Australian imperialism looked to the United States, not Britain, as its most important strategic and military ally.

Labor foreign affairs spokesperson Penny Wong, who is at the Australian American Leadership Dialogue, concluded a speech on October 1 with the words: “Seventy-five years on, Australia still looks to America as its key partner.”

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