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By Mike Head
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Australian government echoes aggressive US shift on South China Sea

Clearly acting under intense pressure from Washington, the Australian government last week issued a statement matching a US turn to declare “illegal” China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Australia suddenly abandoned its previous policy of formal neutrality on the many competing claims by China and neighbouring countries in the highly strategic and resource-rich sea, just 10 days after a similar declaration by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Pompeo’s July 13 statement was belligerent and provocative. “We are making clear: Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them,” he said, accusing China of seeking to “unilaterally impose its will on the region.”

For the first time, the United States has **officially sided** with the regional countries that have rival claims in the South China Sea. Pompeo’s statement contained an implicit threat to take military action on the pretext of protecting these countries from Chinese “bullying.” He declared: “The world will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as its maritime empire.”

Initially, on July 16, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison failed to endorse the abrupt change in the US position, reflecting the concern in some Australian ruling circles about openly clashing with Beijing, given their heavy dependence on exports to China.

Asked by reporters, Morrison avoided saying whether he agreed that China's activities in the South China Sea are illegal. Instead, he said Australia would continue to support "freedom of navigation" in the region with "our own actions and our own initiatives and our own statements."

Until last week, Australian governments had not taken sides in the sea's territorial disputes. They had urged all sides to resolve them bilaterally, in accordance with a 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling that rejected most Chinese claims to maritime economic zones in the sea.

Likewise, Australian governments so far have declined US requests to join its confrontational "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPs) inside the 12-mile territorial zones claimed by China around its islets in the South China Sea.

But on July 23, via a formal submission to the UN secretary general, Morrison's Liberal-National government echoed the US policy shift, repudiating China's claims, and noting protests by Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

The switch came on the eve of the annual Australia-United States Ministerial (AUSMIN) talks in Washington DC this Tuesday. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic raging across the US, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Linda Reynolds have travelled to personally meet with Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper.

Using similar language to the US, the UN submission said Australia "rejects any claims by China that are inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in particular, maritime claims that do not adhere to its rules on baselines, maritime zones and classification of features."

The Australian document further scorned "China's claims to maritime zones generated by submerged features, or low tide elevations" and said Beijing's claims could not be legitimised by "land building activities or other forms of artificial transformation."

The resulting likelihood of a US and Australian military conflict with China was quickly underscored yesterday. Two US-connected figures in Australia's military-intelligence establishment called for the government to match its "overdue" policy switch by conducting FONOPs.

Former intelligence chief and Defence Department secretary Dennis Richardson said the UN submission should be backed by Australian naval vessels sailing “as close as they wish to those artificial features which the Chinese government have militarised.”

Peter Jennings, the executive director of the government-subsidised Australian Strategic Policy Institute also urged Australian FONOPs within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-claimed islets. Otherwise, “you are really giving de facto acknowledgment of the reality of Chinese control,” he said.



HMAS Parramatta, left, sails with USS America, USS Bunker Hill and USS Barry in the South China Sea [Credit: US Navy/MC3 Nicholas Huynh]

Earlier this month, the US Navy staged war games involving two aircraft carrier strike groups in these strategic waters, which are near key Chinese military bases in southern China. Last week, to underline Pompeo’s statement, a US destroyer conducted another FONOP, while five Australian warships joined a US taskforce and a Japanese naval vessel in the show of force in the neighbouring Philippine Sea.

On every front, the Trump administration is **insisting** that the Australian government must step up its already frontline role in the escalating US offensive against China, following Pompeo’s call last week for all “free nations” to fight Chinese “tyranny,” regardless of the economic consequences.

In a blatant case of imperialist hypocrisy, the US has not even ratified the 1982 UNCLOS treaty. So Australia is essentially acting on its behalf in taking the issue to the UN. Australia’s July 23 document carries a request that it be circulated to all UN member states, possibly setting in train processes for a UN declaration against China.

The Australian declaration actually went beyond the 2016 tribunal ruling, rejecting China's subsequent arguments, based on archipelagic baselines around the Pratas, Paracel, Spratly and Macclesfield Bank groups. Australia dismissed "any claims to internal waters, territorial sea, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf based on such straight baselines."

Australia's document did not contain Pompeo's allegations of bullying. Last Saturday, however, just before departing for the AUSMIN consultations, Payne and Reynolds similarly accused China of "coercive conduct" and "militarisation" in the South China Sea.

The cynical and provocative character of the US-Australian position is all the greater because some of the countries with claims in the South China Sea, notably the Philippines, have sought to reach bilateral territorial agreements with China, to which they have major economic ties.

A commentary by the Lowy Institute, an Australian corporate think tank, noted that Australia's alignment with the US "puts it in the potentially awkward position of being more stridently opposed to the PRC's [China's] claims than the maritime Southeast Asian states that have a direct stake in the disputes."

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the Australian alignment behind the US switch is not simply an accommodation to the Trump administration, which is ramping up its anti-China demagoguery. Canberra's shift is based also on the expectation that a post-presidential election Democratic administration would be equally antagonistic to China.

In fact, Donald Trump and Joe Biden are vying with each other to be more belligerent in denouncing China, which the US ruling class regards as a threat to its decaying post-World War II international dominance.

In line with the opposition Labor Party's own complete support for the US military alliance, it quickly backed the Morrison government's UN declaration. Party leader Anthony Albanese said Australia needed to "stand up for international law."

The US-Australian position has nothing whatever to do with respect for international law, which they have constantly flouted, including via illegal invasions and military interventions from the Vietnam War to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and unlawful bugging operations around the globe, including in East Timor.

The South China Sea is a key flashpoint for another world war. The US is seeking to militarily control it because up to one-third of the world's shipping passes through it, and China relies heavily on the route, as do Japan and South Korea. A key element of US military strategy in fighting a war with China is to dominate its surrounding waters so as to be able to launch offensive strikes against China as well as mount a naval blockade to strangle it economically.

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