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Chinese navy conducts exercises in east Indian Ocean

By Peter Symonds

14 February 2014

A Chinese naval exercise in waters between Indonesia and Australia has prompted calls in Australia and India for greater military collaboration to counter what one report described as “Beijing’s increasingly bold maritime posture in the Indo-Pacific.”

The reaction is another sign of the growing tensions produced by the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which includes a strengthening of US alliances and military forces throughout the region aimed at encircling China. The US has encouraged allies such as Australia and Japan, and strategic partner India, to develop closer military ties.

The Australian air force, reportedly at the instigation of US officials, scrambled a P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft to the area to observe the Chinese exercise. According to the Chinese state media, two destroyers and the amphibious landing vessel, Changbaishan, passed through Indonesia’s Sunda Strait on January 29 into waters between the Indonesian island of Java and northern Australia. The three vessels completed a series of drills before heading north through the nearby Lombok Strait.

An article in the *Australian* entitled, “Sea change in China power,” rang the alarm bell in Australian security circles. It declared the exercise was “a wake-up call to anyone still doubting

China's long-term intention to be able to project force in the Indian Ocean." The naval exercise was a first for China in the eastern Indian Ocean and the first time a Chinese task force has used Indonesia's Sunda and Lombok Straits to enter or exit the Indian Ocean.

US strategists have long identified these straits, as well as the Malacca Strait, as key strategic "choke points" that could be used to enforce an economic blockade of China in the event of a US-China conflict. China depends heavily on energy and raw material imported from the Middle East and Africa via shipping lanes that pass through these straits.

The *Australian* comment was written by two think tank analysts—Rory Medcalf, from the Lowy Institute, and C. Raja Mohan, from India's Observer Research Foundation. Both are advocates of stronger Australian-Indian ties and co-chair the Australia-India Roundtable. While not rejecting China's right to protect its vital sea lanes, they assert that China has to be integrated into "a rules-based system" and "one that equally accepts India's growing maritime links with the Pacific."

The phrase "rules-based system" is used, above all by Washington, to insist that Beijing subordinate itself to a world in which the US sets the rules. India, which is expanding its own navy, is forging closer economic and political ties in East Asia as part of its "Look East" strategy. It has already come into dispute with China over joint Indian-Vietnamese energy exploration in areas of the South China Sea claimed by both Beijing and Hanoi.

In a separate blog, Medcalf said there was "nothing illegal or fundamentally hostile" about the recent Chinese naval exercise, which took place in international waters. The Australian government has barely commented. Nevertheless, the extensive Australian media reportage of the event makes clear that it was regarded as an unwelcome intrusion.

Medcalf and Mohan call for "new kinds of maritime security dialogue and practical surveillance co-operation among the region's maritime democracies, including Australia, Indonesia and India."

Australia is already engaged in extensive surveillance of areas of the Indian Ocean to the north and west of the continent, particularly as part of the reactionary "border protection" anti-refugee policy that is supported both by the Coalition government and the Labor opposition. Australian naval vessels and aircraft routinely patrol the areas to the south of Indonesia to block asylum seekers' boats headed for Australia. On several occasions, Australian warships have intruded into Indonesian territorial waters, provoking protests from Jakarta.

Washington regards Australia as central to the "pivot." The Obama administration has already secured a basing arrangement for US Marines in the northern city of Darwin and is seeking greater access for US warships, submarines and military aircraft. A report issued last November by the US-based Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments entitled, "Gateway to the Indo-

Pacific: Australian Defense Strategy and the Future of the Australia-US Alliance,” detailed the importance of Australian bases to any US war with China, including in the seizure of the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits. (See: “US think tank report: Australia central to American war plans against China)

India is boosting its defence ties with Australia, Japan and Indonesia. Just days after the Chinese naval exercise, the Indian and Indonesian navies indicated a possible upgrading of their biannual joint patrol to a full joint exercise. As reported by the *Diplomat*, Indonesian Lieutenant Colonel Amrin Rosihan said a joint exercise would involve more vessels to “strengthen navy-to-navy ties.”

India has been forging closer relations with Japan, following the recent trip by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for India’s Republic Day celebrations. The two countries agreed to conduct a joint naval exercise in the Western Pacific some time in 2014, and New Delhi invited the Japanese navy to participate in the Malabar multilateral exercises in the Indian Ocean.

The US engages in joint exercises with most countries in the region. It already has military bases in Japan, South Korea, Guam, Diego Garcia and Singapore, as well as Australia, and is seeking new basing arrangements with the Philippines. The US navy routinely traverses waters just off the Chinese mainland and monitors all Chinese naval exercises. In December, a US missile cruiser, closely shadowing Chinese navy vessels in the South China Sea, narrowly avoided a collision.

By comparison, the exercise involving three Chinese warships in waters south of Indonesia is a small operation. Nevertheless, as the coverage in the Australian media underscores, any such Chinese activity will be seized upon as a pretext to stir up anxiety over the “China threat” and justify US-led military preparations for conflict.