

Perspectives

The Yellow Sea flare incident: Expect more of the same

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A May 4 [incident](#) in which Australian defence personnel were placed in danger by the conduct of a People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) fighter jet both reinforces and intensifies challenges for Canberra in its management of Australia's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The incident involved a PLAAF Chengdu J-10 multirole fighter releasing flares in the flightpath of a Royal Australian Navy MH-60R Seahawk, forcing the latter to take evasive measures.

Flares can bring down helicopters if they are ingested by the latter's engines, or hit its rotor blades.

Canberra's response was firm but measured. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [said](#) that the incident was 'completely unacceptable' and that the government had made this 'very clear' via 'appropriate diplomatic representations' through multiple channels, including government to government as well as defence to defence levels. He added that the Australian government had elected to make the issue public 'in order to be able to speak out very clearly and unequivocally that this behaviour is unacceptable'. At the same time, Australia's Department of Defence released a [statement](#) which described the interaction as 'unsafe and unprofessional' and outlined Australia's expectation that 'all countries, including China, to operate their militaries in a professional and safe manner.'

Yet Canberra has been here before. In November last year, a PRC People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warship emitted [sonar pulses](#) which caused minor injuries to Australian naval divers in the water, despite the Australian vessel's [request](#) for it to stay clear beforehand. In May 2022, an Australian Air Force P-8 Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft ingested [chaff](#) released by a PLAAF fighter that had [intercepted](#) it. In February 2022, a PLAN ship, [plotting](#) a course past Australia's coastline, [illuminated](#) an Australian P-8 with a laser. In each case, diplomatic representations were made.¹

As distinct from previous occasions, this time Beijing has not questioned the narrative of what occurred in the engagement but has instead doubled down. It too has registered a diplomatic process, claiming that 'provocative' acts of [spying](#) by the Australian helicopter had instigated the incident, rejecting the Australian government's [assertion](#) that the aircraft was supporting the enforcement of United Nations-backed sanctions on North Korea. A Defense Ministry spokesperson also [stated](#) that the measures taken by the jet were 'legitimate and reasonable', raising the question as to the degree to which operational decisions resulting in dangerous manoeuvres are sanctioned at higher levels.

¹ See, e.g., Dana Morse, 'Federal government says it will not be deterred by Chinese 'intimidation' tactics in South China Sea', *ABC News*, June 5 2022 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-05/australian-government-wont-be-intimidated-in-south-china-sea/101127204>>; Australian Government Department of Defence, 'Chinese interception of P-8A Poseidon on 26 May 2022', media release, June 5 2022 <<https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2022-06-05/chinese-interception-p-8a-poseidon-26-may-2022>>; Anthony Albanese, interview, Sky News, November 20 2023 <<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/television-interview-sky-news-afternoon-agenda-5>>.

That the incident occurred in international waters and airspace appears not to have been contradicted by Beijing. But questions of geography, as well as the capability of the platform in question, appear to have played a part in shaping PRC's response. The Seahawk can perform a number of roles, including anti-submarine and surface ships warfare, but also surveillance. And the area in which it was deployed was not only alongside North Korea, but also in the vicinity of a cluster of PRC naval bases, shipyards and training facilities near Qingdao (i.e., the Jianggezhuang naval base) and Dalian. Beijing has also [claimed](#) that the helicopter was operating near active PRC naval exercises.

These factors arguably applied to previous dangerous engagements by People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces as well. The November 2023 sonar incident was said to have occurred in international waters inside Japan's exclusive economic zone. But a PLA source [questioned](#) whether it occurred near disputed territories or a PRC naval exercise. The incident in which the P-8 Poseidon was intercepted is also [understood](#) to have been relatively close to the Scarborough Shoal – one of the areas subject to territorial disputes between PRC and the Philippines. That too involved aircraft with maritime intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities.

On this front, Beijing's protestations could in part stem from the reality that advancements in modern military technology allows the surveillance reach of military platforms in international waters to extend well into the contiguous zones and indeed onto nearby continents. This conjoins with the broader issue, both within PRC state media and popular online discourse, that the problem is not whether foreign craft stay within the boundaries of international waters, but rather the simpler issue of their [proximity](#) to the PRC: it is seen as problematic in the PRC that military assets from faraway nations are regularly dispatching in what is effectively '[China's front door](#)'. This has been a recurring theme in PRC media [criticisms](#) of foreign (and in particular US) exercises near PRC and the territory it claims.

It is not hard to point out the hypocrisy of these claims.

PLA navy ships constantly [shadow](#) joint exercises between the US and its allies and partners, and have in the past coursed close to [Australia](#), [Alaska](#) and even the [UK](#). Within Asia, last year, PRC naval vessels [sailed](#) by Japanese islands hundreds of kilometres north of Okinawa, in an exercise the *Global Times*, citing an unidentified analyst, [said](#) 'could... serve to give those with a guilty conscience a warning'.

[Unauthorised intrusions](#) by PRC aircraft into Japan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) rose more than six-fold between 2010 and 2019 to almost 700 per year – not only near contested features, but alongside Kyushu and more recently [northern Honshu](#). They increased almost threefold in the ADIZ of South Korea between 2016-2018, coinciding with the [deployment](#) of US THAAD missile defence system on the Korean peninsula. This is to say nothing of the harassment by PRC coastguard and maritime militia of the [Philippines](#) and [Vietnam](#), allegations of sending spy balloons over [Canada](#), [Japan](#) and the [US](#), cyber warfare accusations, and expansive PRC maritime claims that extend across distant stretches of ocean that reach near [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#) and Brunei.

For the Australian Labor government, all this creates the conundrum that committing on its path to 'stabilising' relations through restrained diplomacy risks looking like succumbing to intimidation – a charge that is increasingly [levelled](#) at it by its [critics](#) and contemplated by other [observers](#). This is likely to be accentuated by the problem that both countries' responses to the latest incident forebode, if anything, the possibility of a repeat of such manoeuvres in the future, with no guarantees that the next occasion will not result in casualties or a further escalation.

But the bigger problem is that all this points to the very real prospect of a [security spiral](#) unfolding in the western Pacific. Indeed, such is the level of strategic tension in the region fed by these and other factors that, as a forthcoming UTS:ACRI Analysis by former Australian representative to Taiwan and UTS:ACRI Adjunct Fellow Kevin Magee lays out, Taiwanese experts have asserted that the possibility of a conflict breaking out in the South China Sea over the next few years is greater than that of a war breaking out over Taiwan.

A complicating factor is that in both the South China and East China Sea, multiple nations are involved – not just the US and the PRC. Beijing accuses Washington of ‘[constraining](#)’ it through island chains. On the other side of the equation, if Washington stands aside in disputes between its partners and PRC, then it could see its alliances disintegrate, its global standing collapse, and a potentially permanent reconfiguration of the Pacific’s strategic architecture. To the extent that this is the case, patterns of dangerous interactions involving PLA forces and those of the US and its allies in the Pacific may not be by design, but are neither, in an absolute sense, merely a series of random accidents.

The Albanese government has to an extent been snared in a trap of investing significant political capital in a relationship it only has a partial role in shaping. The rhetoric of the previous Coalition government lacked in basic diplomatic finesse, but equally there can be no understating some of the vitriol stemming from Beijing, whose state press and Foreign Ministry regularly paints Australia as a [slavish US lackey](#), and a [complicit party](#) in bolstering US hegemony.

The Labor government’s aspirations of ‘stabilising’ the relationship with Beijing is sensible and it should be praised for its progress on a number of fronts, not least the resumption of high level bilateral dialogue, but the latest incident shows that more of exactly the same may not be the optimal path forward.

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