

## Perspectives

# Examining the 'why' of the PRC's live fire exercises in the Tasman Sea

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**Corey Lee Bell and Elena Collinson**

*Dr Corey Lee Bell is a Project and Research Officer at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).*

*Elena Collinson is head of analysis at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).*

On February 21 and 22 2025, People's Republic of China (PRC) navy vessels conducted [live fire exercises](#) about 340 nautical miles from Sydney, having earlier been spotted [operating](#) within Australia's 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone.

These exercises have been a cause for significant disquiet amongst policymakers and public commentators, particularly because of the absence of notice from Beijing, with the Australian defence force only [learning](#) of the drill half an hour after it had already commenced via an alert from a commercial pilot flying near the PRC warships.

The Labor government has sought to allay concerns, with Defence Minister Richard Marles [noting](#) that the ships did not violate international law, while describing their presence as 'not unprecedented, but... an unusual event.' The last use of live fire by a non-allied nation off the coast of Sydney was by Imperial Japanese Navy [mini-submarines](#) in 1942.

Marles' reluctance to label Beijing's acts 'unprecedented' is peculiar, with the evocative connotations of the term having long been eroded by a litany of new forms of PRC maritime bellicosity. 'Unprecedented' acts in the last two years alone include the PRC's highly militarised coast guard using [bladed weapons](#), [water cannons](#) and [ramming](#) to damage Philippine vessels in the South China Sea, People's Liberation Army assets intruding into non-contested [Japanese airspace](#) and Japanese [territorial waters](#), PRC ships [cutting undersea cables](#) near Taiwan and in the Baltic Sea and a PRC jet [dropping flares](#) in the flight path of an Australian military aircraft over the Yellow Sea. The latter manoeuvre was [repeated](#) over the South China Sea, targeting an Australian surveillance plane, days before the arrival of the PRC warships off Australia's coast.

Analysis on what prompted the exercises have thus far focused on the potential triggers – such as a [tit-for-tat](#) response, given that Australia had recently [participated](#) in joint exercises with the US and the UK in the South China Sea, and Beijing's attempts to erode Canberra's confidence in the security commitments of the 'America first' Trump administration. While both suggestions warrant consideration, placing the exercises in the context of this broader trend of unabating escalations compels an examination of changes within the PRC as a primary driver.

The deeper source of the radical intensification of Beijing's maritime bellicosity has been changes not only in Beijing's maritime tactics or strategy, but, more fundamentally, the PRC's national identity. What this change means, and what Beijing's acts of intimidation have partly sought to convey, is that Australia and other nations in the region are no longer dealing with a continental superpower in faraway East Asia, but rather a '[great maritime power](#)' whose presence, and capacity for power projection, is to be henceforth more ubiquitous.

PRC elites often see 2012 – when the Chinese Communist Party first [announced](#) its intention to become a ‘great maritime power’ – as [marking](#) the great awakening of the PRC’s [maritime nationalism](#), propelled by nationwide demonstrations over the Japanese government’s [decision](#) to purchase three of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private owner, and the PRC’s ‘victory’ over the Philippines in the [Scarborough Shoal standoff](#) – a clash which set in motion the Philippines decision to initiate the [South China Sea Arbitration](#), which largely ruled in Manila’s favour in 2016.

Yet the reality is that Beijing’s ‘great maritime power’ aspiration developed gradually, and for additional reasons. Core among them was the perceived need to shift from China’s historic legacy as a continental power, to a modern superpower identity more in line with the economic reality of its growing reliance on maritime commerce.

Reflecting this, aside from rising maritime security tensions, 2012 was also a watershed year for PRC’s maritime economy, which [exceeded](#) five trillion yuan for the first time (a figure that has since [effectively doubled](#)), with ocean exports hitting US\$200 billion, while the PRC again overtook South Korea as the world’s largest shipbuilder. Such developments led to the PRC’s maritime economy being formally listed as a key priority area in the State Council’s [12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan for National Strategic Emerging Industries](#).

Earlier, in 2004, a [China Youth Daily article](#) that surveyed the views of the nation’s leading maritime affairs experts emphasised a growing consensus that this economic aspect of the PRC’s maritime economy was both essential to its rise and a logical focus of its security agenda.

This occurred at around the same time that President Hu Jintao first reportedly [described](#) the Straits of Malacca, through which much of the PRC’s trade commuted, as a ‘boot on China’s throat’ – giving rise to the narrative of the ‘Malacca dilemma,’ or anxiety in Beijing at its incapacity to control its most pivotal lines of communication. Hu’s ‘great maritime power’ proclamation augmented this anxiety as an animating force in the PRC’s strategic planning by elevating, or seeming to elevate, maritime security as an existential level priority – similar to that applied to the defence of the homeland and the constitution. This in part re-energised a [naval ship building frenzy](#) that has seen the PRC since that year build more than double the amount of vessels that constitute the surface fleet of the Royal Navy.

One aspect of this development could be described as a ‘continentalisation’ of maritime security. In a 2010 [paper](#), Dai Bingguo, a State Councillor and the Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group, raised the concept of ‘core interests’ to delineate matters of existential significance – which included protecting the nation’s territorial integrity and ‘safeguarding the sustainable development of China’s economy and society.’

Hu’s statement that ‘China is a major maritime as well as land country,’ came to be the precursor for approaches to continental territorial integrity beginning to be repurposed and applied to disputed maritime features, such as those in the South and East China Seas [listed](#) in the 1992 *Law of the People’s Republic of China concerning Territorial Waters and Adjacent Regions* (e.g., the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, the Pratas Islands and Paracel Islands). These were in practice applied most arduously to those places deemed to have pertinence to Hu and Dai’s emphasis on ‘sustainable development’ – features that sat aside rich deposits of commodities such as minerals/fossil fuels (i.e., the [Spratleys](#) and the [Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands](#)).

Moreover, the rationale that saw maritime resources in nearby waters become a ‘core interest’ also began to be [applied](#) to maritime trade, raising the spectre of Beijing existentialising its capacity to not only control its proximate waters, but to secure more distant lines of communication.

What brings this back to the events near Australia is that the PRC’s ‘great maritime power’ concept not only essentialises the demonstration of a capacity to project power in places far beyond domains subject to PRC territorial claims – something we are likely to see more of moving forward. It also conveys particular ideas about power evident in Hu’s Malacca Strait preoccupation; principally, that potential economic vulnerabilities, and other actors’ capacity to exploit them, is a potent architect of current, real-world hierarchies of power.

Thus, far from being an incidental outcome, the disruption of flights across the Tasman Sea by the PRC's live fire exercises was likely the very thing that was planned and desired – with the demonstrated capacity to disrupt transit, formerly on display during exercises around Taiwan, serving as a 'grey zone' type of low-level commerce warfare. That it occurred between geographically and politically intimate democracies (Australia and New Zealand) far from East Asia arguably amplified the visceral impact of Beijing's message.

Beijing is also likely targeting Australia for similar reasons that it has targeted other US allies in the South and East China Seas – to undermine confidence in Washington, knowing that as the US retention of the balance of power in the western Pacific is shifting from being achievable through US naval power projection alone, to being contingent upon basing rights with, and possible military contributions from, regional allies.

While power asymmetries mean that the challenge that Beijing's escalations pose are arguably too steep for Australia to effectively respond to on its own, Beijing's efforts to intimidate belie the importance that Canberra should seek to get more out of Washington, whose recent strategy of responding to acts of intimidation with condemnations, re-commitments to security agreements with allies and post-factum military drills have done little to reign in Beijing's maritime bellicosity.

## Authors

Dr Corey Lee Bell is a Project and Research Officer at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).

His work has been published in *The National Interest*, *The Diplomat*, *The Australian*, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's *The Strategist*, *Yazhou zhoukan* and other outlets. He has also contributed to edited volumes and think tank reports. He has served as a researcher or visiting scholar in Greater China, South Korea and Japan, and is a former editor of *Taiwan Insight*, a digital magazine affiliated with the University of Nottingham. His research interests include China's international relations and geopolitics in the Asia Pacific. He attained his doctoral degree at the University of Melbourne's Asia Institute.

Elena Collinson is Manager, Research Analysis at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI).

She is principal author of the *Australia-China monthly wrap-up* (previously the *Australia-China relations monthly summary*) launched in 2018. Her work has been published in *The National Interest*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Guardian*, the *South China Morning Post*, *The Diplomat*, *The Conversation*, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*, the Australian Institute of International Affairs' *Australian Outlook*, and the Council on Foreign Relations' *Asia Unbound* amongst other outlets, and she has contributed chapters to edited volumes. She is a lawyer admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and has previously held research and project positions in Australian departmental, ministerial and Senate offices, at state and federal levels.