

Australia

Australia warns airlines over Chinese live-fire exercises

Canberra calls for transparency over naval drills after commercial flights rerouted from Tasman Sea



A Chinese naval frigate sails in the Torres Strait off Australia's coast this month © Australian Defence Force via AP

Nic Fildes in Sydney and **Kathrin Hille** in Taipei 8 HOURS AGO

Australia has warned commercial airlines that Chinese warships are conducting live-fire military exercises off the country's east coast, prompting them to reroute flights.

The Financial Times revealed this week that a Chinese naval task group of two warships and a supply vessel had [travelled within 150 nautical miles](#) of Sydney, in what one person familiar with the matter called an “unprecedented” move down Australia's coast.

The ships were being shadowed by Australian and New Zealand forces.

Australian authorities warned pilots operating flights in the Tasman Sea on Friday of the Chinese exercises.

The Civil Aviation Safety Authority and Airservices Australia, an air traffic control body, said they were aware of reports of live fire being used in international waters and “as a precaution” advised airlines with planned flights to reroute.

A Qantas spokesperson said the airline had “adjusted some flights”, including those of its Jetstar subsidiary, and would “monitor the situation”.

An Air New Zealand spokesperson said the airline had modified flight paths to avoid the area

the area.

Australian officials said the exercises were legal and conducted in international waters. Anthony Albanese, Australia's prime minister, said he had consulted with the defence forces and Christopher Luxon, his New Zealand counterpart, over the drills, adding that there was "no imminent danger" to Australian or New Zealand assets.

But Richard Marles, Australia's defence minister, told broadcaster ABC that [China's](#) radio notification was picked up by commercial aircraft "flying over the Tasman", adding that Canberra was not directly informed of the exercise, which is not required but is common practice.

He said the process was "very disconcerting" for airlines, which usually receive notice of live-fire exercises, including those by [Australia's](#) military, 12 to 24 hours ahead of time.

The manoeuvres, which marked a rare occasion of Chinese naval live-fire exercises far from Chinese territory affecting civilian air traffic, have raised concerns about Beijing projecting its influence and military might further afield in the Pacific.

Judith Collins, New Zealand's defence minister, said this week that the presence of "formidable" Chinese warships was "a wake-up call" for a region that has long relied on its geographical isolation as a defence guarantee.

Jennifer Parker, an associate at the Australian National University's National Security College and a former naval officer, said it was "uncommon for the Chinese ships to be here, but it is sending a message and it targets Australia's key vulnerability, which is maritime".

Parker added that the live exercises were not unusual, but it would be "poor form" if firing occurred under a flight route. "It is not aggressive, but it is bad behaviour," she said.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said the exercise by the People's Liberation Army Southern Theater Command was "carried out in a safe, standard and professional manner in accordance with relevant international law and international practice".

The PLA has in the past issued navigational warnings for airspace or waters in connection with missile tests in the Pacific or large-scale military exercises closer to its coast.

Previous live-fire drills in the far seas were conducted further from other countries'

...territory.

Last Sunday, Chinese state media announced that the flotilla consisting of the destroyer Zunyi, one of China's most modern warships, the frigate Hengyang and supply ship Weishanhu were on a multi-day "realistic far seas training" session in the Pacific.

That trip followed a similar training mission by the same naval task force further north in the Pacific over the lunar new year holiday at the end of January.

Penny Wong, Australia's foreign minister, said she would confront her counterpart Wang Yi at a meeting of G20 foreign ministers in Johannesburg on Friday over the "transparency provided in relation to these exercises, particularly the live-fire exercises".

Additional reporting by Wenjie Ding in Beijing

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