

Australia monitoring Chinese 'task group' in the Philippine Sea

The news came as Acting Prime Minister Richard Marles announced a huge shake-up of Australia's defence department.



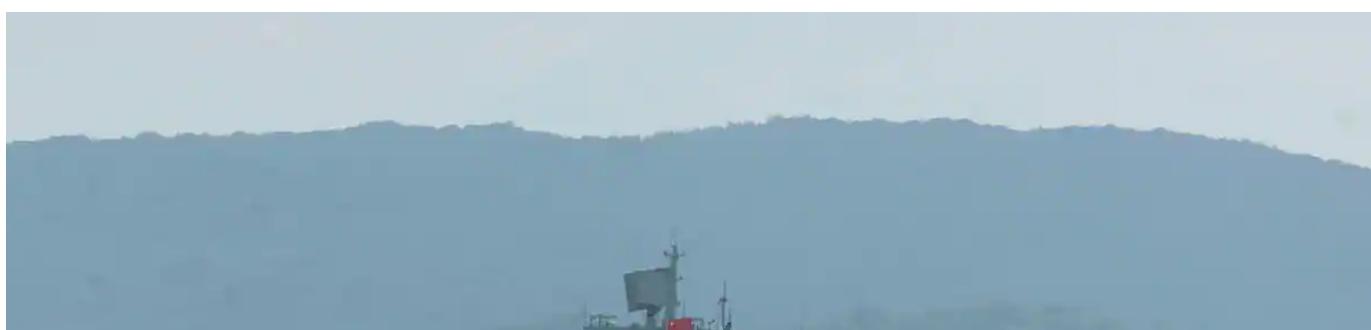
Acting Prime Minister Richard Marles said the establishment of a new agency will drive clearer accountability for the delivery of major projects. Source: AAP / Lukas Coch

Acting Prime Minister Richard Marles has confirmed the government is monitoring a Chinese navy fleet in the Philippine Sea.

While the trajectory and size of the fleet is unconfirmed, the monitoring activity is taking place to prepare for the possibility that the "task group" could be en route to Australian territory.

"We don't know where it's going, and it could have a whole lot of destinations," Marles told reporters on Monday afternoon.

"We are monitoring it and we will continue to do so until we know that it is not coming to Australia."





People's Liberation Army-Navy frigate Hengyang. Source: Supplied

It comes after a Chinese flotilla circumnavigated Australia and conducted live firing exercises off the coast in February.

Marles said it appeared to be a "routine" movement but because it was reported by the Australian Financial Review last week, he wanted to acknowledge it.

The defence minister made the comments after announcing a major restructure of the Defence Department, which will reshape the way it functions, in a move being framed by the government as the biggest overhaul in almost half a century.

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New Defence agency to oversee capability groups

A new combined Defence Delivery Agency will replace the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group, the Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Enterprise and the Naval Shipbuilding and Sustainment Group.

"The agency will be autonomous," Marles said.

"It will work clearly in partnership with the Department of Defence and the Australian Defence Force, but it will be autonomous in the way in which it does its work and the way in which it reports to Government through the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Industry."

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He described the new consolidated group as being a better use of funding in the defence portfolio.

"This is one of the biggest changes to defence that we have seen," Marles said.

"It will greatly change how defence operates.

"It will greatly improve the quality of the defence spend, and it will make sure that as we spend more money in the defence budget, we are doing so in a way which sees programs delivered on time and on budget."

The government is moving to reassure staff the consolidation won't involve job cuts.

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