

Australia is playing in the international greyzone: it is time to get out of our unthinking alliance with the US

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Unbeknownst to most of the population, Australia is a willing player in a global game of Risk. The risks are great, the rewards less so. We do not need to play this game.

The current animosity between the United States-led western world and strategic partners Russia and China is all about power. It is not about human rights, democracy, trade, intellectual property, the ‘rules-based international order’ or any of the other canards used by politicians, commentators and the media to describe current events.

The United States had for a historically brief period, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a unipolar moment where it could largely do as it pleased in international affairs. That period of global hegemony is now history but the myth of US exceptionalism within the minds of its elites, and their acolytes, persists.

China and Russia on the other hand, both having learned the folly of empire, have rather more limited goals. But in a case of projection, Western powers assume Russia and China seek global domination. This is based on the fallacious logic, as argued by former US ambassador and Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman, that because the United States had the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny these countries must too.

At this point, it is highly unlikely that the United States along with any grouping of its allies can militarily defeat China and Russia in any plausible scenario. Thus, the conflict between these two poles is primarily informational and to a lesser extent economic (e.g. sanctions). In other words, this is a grey-zone conflict, otherwise known as political warfare.

General Angus Campbell, the Chief of the Defence Force, suggests that it is authoritarian states that are primarily responsible for political warfare, conducting grey-zone “operations that subvert, erode and undermine, breaking international rules and norms, but ones that, in the eyes of the targeted state, fall short of requiring a war response.” The empirical evidence indicates that the greatest proponent of grey-zone operations by a large margin is the United States. It has chalked up an impressive record of coup d’état’s, colour revolutions, unilateral economic sanctions and when that failed overt military action, often outside the bounds of the United Nations!

Australia is a willing protagonist in supporting the grey-zone operations of the United States. We are exposed to it every day through the media, politicians, commentators and think tanks such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). The mechanism is a managed narrative that manipulates, exaggerates and amplifies negative stories on target countries such as China and Russia whilst ignoring important stories that expose the misdeeds of Australia’s allies.

Specific tactics include accepting as fact unproven allegations, failing to ask obvious questions when the official story has logical and factual inconsistencies, omitting important and relevant context, ignoring the legitimate concerns of other nations, the use of pejorative and delegitimising language, hypocrisy and double standards, labelling as propaganda/fake news/disinformation inconvenient evidence, naming those who question the official narrative as conspiracy theorists/apologists/denialists/puppets/useful idiots, a complete lack of scepticism of official sources with a track record for deception and constant repetition.

Concrete examples abound including Russiagate, Ukraine and Crimea, MH17, Syria, chemical weapons attacks (the Skripal's, Navalny, Douma), Hong Kong, the South China Sea and the Uighurs along with many more of a less significant nature.

The suppression of evidence by the management of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) indicating that the Douma 2018 chemical weapons attack was staged is perhaps the most important case study of how the narrative is being managed (see [here](#) for an archive of related P&I articles). It is important because the events surrounding it could have led to conflict between nuclear powers, there is a prima facie case that the suppression of evidence occurred including documents and whistleblower evidence, that the scandal is as significant as that of Iraqi WMDs and that the story has not received any coverage by mainstream media.

This case study highlights how the media plays a critical role as narrative managers. It is however a conflicted role, the media being both, in my view, a witting and unwitting player in the grey-zone. Part of the problem is, as described by Chas Freeman, that “we have inhaled our own propaganda, and we are living in the appropriately stoned state that that produces.”

The systemic failure of the Australian media to cover important stories, such as the OPCW scandal, that expose the nefarious actions of Australia's allies indicate active participation. Further examples being leaked documents from the hacking group Anonymous on the extensive information warfare operations of the British Government targeted towards [Syria](#) and [Russia](#) which have received no coverage in the Australian media.

ASPI is perhaps the leading exponent of grey-zone operations in Australia. A recent example being its [Report](#) titled ‘*Strange bedfellows on Xinjiang: The CCP, fringe media and US social media platforms*’. Much of the Report focuses on an independent media organisation, [The Grayzone](#), which has published [articles](#) questioning the broadly accepted narrative of Uighur repression by China. The authors describe The Grayzone as a denialist fringe media organisation highlighting that its reporting has been amplified by Chinese state media and its journalists have appeared on Russian and Chinese state media.

This Report is not about determining the truth or otherwise of the serious allegations of human rights abuses against Uighurs. Rather it serves the purposes of generating negative coverage of the Chinese Government, attempting to marginalise a media organisation that

challenges these allegations (and in doing so discouraging other media organisations from covering this story) and perhaps most insidiously laying the groundwork for censoring individuals and organisations who question the accepted narrative.

The evidence supporting this view includes:

- Nowhere in the Report is the accuracy of the The Grayzone's reporting questioned. There are no claims of The Grayzone disseminating false news or disinformation nor evidence provided. This indicates tacit acknowledgement of the accuracy of the reporting;
- The use of the term 'denialist' as an attempt to delegitimise The Greyzone. The only evidence to support this is a link to an article by Coda Story which does not question the accuracy of the reporting but rather relies upon insinuations. Not surprisingly, Coda Story is partly funded by one of the agents of regime change for the US Government, the National Endowment for Democracy. ASPI itself is also partly funded by the US State Department and other organisations with an interest in belligerence towards China and Russia;
- The use of the term 'fringe,' another attempt at delegitimation. Interestingly enough it appears that ASPI (24,000 Facebook likes, 37,000 Twitter followers) and Coda Story (12,000 Facebook likes, 14,000 Twitter followers) are more 'fringe' than The Grayzone (136,000 Youtube subscribers, 24,000 Facebook likes, 96,000 Twitter followers – its editor has 224,000 Twitter followers). Youtube videos from The Grayzone, often featuring interviews with prominent individuals, regularly attract many tens of thousands of views with some more than 100,000.

The extension of ASPIs logic is that 'fringe' media organisations are doing the bidding of foreign powers (something which ASPI itself could be accused of doing) and should thus be exposed and ultimately censored, Soviet Union style.

James Bradley in *The China Mirage* describes the tragicomedy of US policy towards China before, during and after World War Two, based on a managed narrative of China that was far from reality. This is an eery corollary to present circumstances where narratives are being managed once again to suit powerful interests.

Bradley argues that a more realistic appraisal of China by the United States could have averted the Chinese civil war, the Korean war, the Vietnam war and many millions of deaths. There is little to gain from contemporary grey-zone operations for either the nation or the average citizen. The potential costs are great, including conflict between nuclear-armed powers, which is the likely endpoint of current tensions.

The root cause of Australia's involvement in these extremely risky and unnecessary grey-zone operations is our alliance with the United States and the broader Five Eyes community. It is becoming increasingly clear that whatever benefits Australia once gained from these relationships has now become a grave risk to our national prosperity, security, democracy and sovereignty. We have hitched our wagon on the wrong horse, a once all-

powerful but rapidly declining hegemon, with little left to offer the world other than instability, coercion and conflict. If there was ever a time for a truly independent foreign policy, now is it.