

Submission to the IPAN People's Inquiry

By Major Cameron Leckie (Retired)

Australia needs the United States for defence. But Australia only needs defence because of the United States.

Malcolm Fraser

Introduction

The defence of the nation is the first responsibility of all governments. There are however many ways in which a government can achieve this unfortunate but very necessary responsibility. Since World War Two Australian Governments have applied a two-pronged strategy to 'defend' Australia: the first prong being the Australian Defence Force and the second being Australia's alliance with the United States of America. The term 'defend' should be used advisedly as Australia has not faced a credible conventional military threat since the end of World War Two. Despite this the Australian Defence Force has been involved in numerous conflicts in the post war era and continuously since 2001.

A strong argument, based on the empirical evidence, can be made that Australia's alliance with the United States has been detrimental to our national security (as evidenced by domestic terrorism incidents and the ongoing threat of terrorism) as well as our democracy and freedom (as evidenced by the seemingly ever-increasing terrorism and national security legislation and secret trials of national security whistle-blowers). Looking to the future it, as will be described, appears that the cost of maintaining the alliance with the United States will rise, perhaps significantly, whilst the benefits will become increasingly limited. Indeed, it is likely that the alliance will become increasingly detrimental to our national interest.

After providing a brief introduction about myself, this submission will describe the current global context that has seen Australia's strategic environment rapidly deteriorate. The future trajectory of the United States will then be examined, a critical question for Australia given the current importance of the alliance to our national security. An analysis on the question of whether China poses a threat to Australia is then presented. The impact of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) on Australia's deteriorating security environment will then be reviewed. The submission will conclude with a brief exploration of armed neutrality as an alternate defence strategy and recommendations.

Personal background



I enlisted in the Australian Army as an officer cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1995. I graduated from the Royal Military College – Duntroon in 1998 and was allocated to the Royal Australian Corps of Signals (RA Sigs). I served 24 years in the Army, retiring in 2019 with the rank of Major.

During my service I deployed on three operations, to East Timor in 1999 – 2000, to the Solomon Islands in 2003 and to Indonesia in 2005 after the Boxing Day Tsunami. I had numerous postings throughout my career, including to various RA Sigs units, training organisations and to a project team introducing major new capabilities into the Army (Land 200/Joint Project 2072). I held command positions at Troop and Squadron level and finished my career as the

Executive Officer (Second in Command) of the 1st Signal Regiment where I received a Silver Commendation.

I am proud to have served in the Australian Army. However, as I matured, read more widely and observed events occurring around the world I gradually came to the conclusion that the primary mission of the Australian Army, and the Australian Defence Force more generally, was no longer to defend Australia and its national interests, but rather to support the imperialism of the United States of America. I believe this is inimical to Australia's national interests, our sovereignty, democracy, security and future prosperity. This realisation was a significant factor in my decision to resign from the Army.

I first publicly questioned Australia's reliance on the United States in a 2012 essay published in the *Australian Defence Force Journal* (Leckie 2012). Over the ensuing years, it became evident to me that the United States was, like all previous empires, heading towards terminal decline. I wrote two subsequent essays on this topic and its relevance to Australia's defence posture/policy. Unfortunately, neither of these articles were published by the Journal (these essays have been provided separately to the Inquiry). Over the last two years I have had a number of articles about Australia's alliance with the United States published at John Menadue's public policy journal *Pearls and Irritations* (Leckie 2019, 2020c) and *Independent Australia* (Leckie 2021b).

Global context

The Department of Defence's *2020 Defence Strategic Update* identified strategic competition, primarily between the United States and China as the principle driver of strategic dynamics in our region (Commonwealth of Australia 2020). Strategic competition between the United States and Russia has also re-appeared in the aftermath of the coup d'état which overthrew the sitting Government of Ukraine in 2014. The late Professor Stephen F. Cohen, a historian and scholar of Russian-American relationships, described the poor state of relations between Russia and the United States as being more dangerous than at any time during the first Cold War (Cohen 2019). Meanwhile China and Russia have established a comprehensive strategic partnership, if not an alliance, that is deepening with each passing year. As noted by retired Indian diplomat MH Bhadrakumar, the United States cannot overwhelm the alliance between Russia and China unless it defeats both nations simultaneously (Bhadrakumar 2020). Clearly the tension between these great powers is increasing, with the potential for a miscalculation by any party that could trigger military conflict between nuclear armed nations.

The emergence/re-emergence of Russia and China as major players in the international system has alarmed some Western nations, in particular the 'Five Eyes' nations led by the United States. Russia and China have been pejoratively labelled as "revisionist powers" united by their "disdain for the West" (Dibb 2019). An exemplar of the thinking that supports this view is a Special Report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) on the China – Russia relationship (Dibb 2019). Unfortunately, as I have critiqued elsewhere (Leckie 2020d), the thinking leading to the conclusion of Sino-Russian "revisionism" is based upon assertions claimed as fact, omits or glosses over key contextual factors, provides wholly unconvincing arguments and applies double standards to Western vis-a-vis Russian and Chinese actions.

A rather more nuanced, and accurate, view of Sino-Russian "revisionism" is provided by MH Bhadrakumar, who argues that "*Russia and China contest a set of neoliberal practices that have evolved in the post-World War II international order validating selective use of human rights as a universal value to legitimize Western intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states*" whilst accepting and continually affirming their commitment to key aspects of the international order such

as the primacy of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, the importance of international law and the centrality of the United Nations (Bhadrakumar 2020).

Cutting the current major power tensions to their essence, what drives the angst towards China and Russia is the re-emergence of a multi-polar world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Western world led by the United States enjoyed a historically brief period which has been labelled as the uni-polar moment. During this period the United States and its Western allies were free to intervene almost anywhere in the world with almost uncontested freedom of military movement (Munich Security Conference 2020). The uni-polar moment has now passed as evidenced by events in Ukraine/Crimea, Syria, Iran, Venezuela, and the South China Sea. Simply put, we now live in a multi-polar world where no one nation, or group of nations, can enforce their will on others without the risk of military conflict, up to and including nuclear war. The military – security establishments and political leaders across the Western world, and the United States in particular, seem unwilling to accept or adapt to this step-change in global power relations. The belligerence of the United States primarily directed at Russia and China in recent years (including before President Trump’s presidency) reflect the re-emergence of a multi-polar world.

Paul Kennedy’s classic *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* described the dynamics that resulted in the rise and fall of great powers over the last five centuries (Kennedy 1987). Since its publication, another chapter to this story has been finalised, being the demise of the Soviet Union whilst a second chapter is currently in progress; that being the decline of the United States. The decline of the United States imperial system, both in absolute and relative terms, is a major factor that must be considered, but rarely is, in the development of Australia’s defence strategy.

The decline of the United States’ imperial system

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. This was a calamitous event for most citizens of the former Soviet Union. Male life expectancy fell from 64 to 58 years with a massive spike in suicide rates (Brainerd 2001). Wages (which fell by half) for up to a third of the population were below subsistence levels whilst hyperinflation destroyed savings (Round & Williams 2010). Corruption was endemic whilst pensions and the healthcare system were woefully inadequate. At its lowest point the Russian economy was just two per cent the size of the United States whereas in the 1980s the Soviet economy was the second largest in the world (Arbatov 2000). Defence spending also fell from near parity to just 2.5% of that of the United States. This led to the dismal performance of the Russian military in Chechnya with one commentator stating that the “*neglect of their armed forces has caused the deterioration of the former superpower’s military to a point of ineffectiveness*” (Celestan 1996).

Few predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union, arguably the most significant geopolitical event in the second half of the twentieth century. Could a similar fate be awaiting the United States? Multiple analysts suggests that this is the case including Kunstler (2007), Orlov (2008), Greer (2014), Hedges (2018) and Martyanov (2021).

The future of the United States is a question is of vital importance to Australia. All of Australia’s defence planning is based upon the assumption that the United States will remain the most powerful military for the foreseeable future (Australian Government 2016). The collapse, or even a significant decline in the United States’ relative power, renders this assumption false with major implications for Australia.

In an unpublished essay provided to the Inquiry separately (Leckie 2018), I argued that the four pillars which supported the United States’ centre of gravity, being the status of the US dollar as the

world's reserve currency, were under a great deal of stress. These pillars are the military, informational and economic dominance of the United States and supportive client states. Sooner or later, I concluded, one or more of these pillars would reach a critical state beyond which the whole edifice of the United States imperial system (see below for the definition of empire) will collapse.

Definition of empire

An empire is an arrangement among nations, backed and usually imposed by military force, which extracts wealth from a periphery of subject nations and concentrates it in the imperial core.

Greer (2014)

Greer (2014) argues that the United States is clearly an empire as evidenced by its importance in international institutional arrangements, the centrality of the US dollar in international trade, its hundreds of military bases located in numerous countries, its willingness to use military force against countries that resist its hegemony and that for much of the second half of the twentieth century despite having only five per cent of the world's population its imperial 'wealth pump' enabled it to consume more than a quarter of the world's energy and industrial output.

The stressors across each of these pillars have accelerated rapidly in the intervening years suggesting that we are currently witnessing the accelerating collapse of the United States imperial system. Table 1 provides some examples that support this conclusion.

Table 1 Examples

Military dominance

- The US has lost the technological advantage across a range of key military technologies, primarily to Russia but also China, including hypersonic and other missile systems, air defence and electronic warfare. This has been demonstrated in Syria, where the Air Defence and Electronic Warfare systems deployed by the Russian and Syrian forces have been extremely successful at defending key targets against US/UK/French missile strikes, Israeli air strikes and armed drone swarm attacks.
- The ability of the US to successfully project force in the littoral approaches to either Russia or China is limited. The PLAN has the world's largest Navy that is rapidly increasing in size as well as quality. Meanwhile the US is reliant upon overseas military bases and its Carrier Strike Groups for force projection. These are extremely vulnerable in conventional conflict. This was demonstrated by Iran's successful precision missile strikes against US bases in Iraq in 2020 and the Houthi precision strikes against Saudi oil infrastructure in 2019, of which the latter were defended by US air defence systems.
- The US record of failure in military campaigns is increasingly obvious to the rest of the world as most recently evidenced by the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the disastrous wars in Iraq and Syria.
- The mobilisation of nearly 100,000 Russian troops, along with their equipment, in a matter of weeks, in response to the recent US supported posturing by the Ukraine of early 2021, cannot be matched by either the US or NATO either in scale or speed. Where it geographically matters, Russia, and China in the South China Sea, have escalation dominance.

Economic dominance

- Depending upon the metric used, the US is no longer the world's largest economy. Within a decade or two, China's economy will be significantly larger than that of the US.
- In the 1970s, the leading democracies, as represented by the G7, represented two thirds of global economic output. They now only represent one third. Thus, the economic

dominance of the broader Western world, key allies to the US, is also in decline relative to the rest of the world.

- The United States economy is addicted to ever increasing quantities of debt to prevent its financial system from imploding. Numerous commentators are starting to talk about the risk of hyperinflation in the US.
- The US has applied sanctions against 39 countries representing one third of the world's population. The threat, or actual use of, sanctions has resulted in a rapidly growing trend of de-dollarisation where target countries implement trading systems that minimise or eliminate the use of the US dollar in international trade. Ultimately this directly undermines the United States' centre of gravity.
- The *2021 Report Card For America's Infrastructure* by the American Society of Civil Engineers rates the country's infrastructure as a C- (Mediocre, requires attention). The Report indicates that the US is investing just half of what is needed to maintain its infrastructure with a growing investment gap that could cost the economy US\$10 trillion by 2039.
- The financialisation of the US economy over decades has eroded the industrial base that resulted in the US becoming the world's largest economy for much of the 20th century. The US economy has been described by author and social critic James Howard Kunstler as a racket of rackets, with a range of industries from healthcare to education and the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate) making enormous profits at the expense of the nation's wellbeing. This is demonstrated by the ever-growing gap between the real economy and financial markets.
- China is producing STEM graduates at the rate of eight to one compared to the US, a ratio that is projected to increase to 15 to one by 2030. China also dominates patent applications submitting more than twice that of the US in 2019.

Information dominance

- American competence was one of the pillars of the United States' strength according to Walt (2020). It is becoming increasingly obvious that the institutional competence of America is rapidly diminishing, as highlighted to the response to COVID-19. The "United States has done a remarkable job of squandering that invaluable reputation for responsible leadership and basic competence" according to Walt (2020). Another view, "America was the greatest success story on earth That story threatens to end on our watch, crushed by the collapse of our institutions and the implosion of social trust" (Brooks 2020).
- The hypocrisy of the United States has become clearly evident to most nations. A prime example being the prolonged and extreme response to relatively low-level interference (even if the worst of all the allegations are true) by Russia in the 2016 Presidential elections compared with the dozens of instances of much more egregious interference by the United States in the affairs of other countries.
- The largescale rioting and months of civil unrest in the United States after the murder of George Floyd has demonstrated that the United States is a divided nation with multiple domestic fault lines. The 'Capitol riot' of January 2021 being another example. As of May 2021, over half of Republican voters believed that President Trump won the 2020 election.
- The glue that holds a nation together is social cohesion, maintained through the shared sacrifices of all citizens. American author Charles Hugh Smith argues that the United States is now a moral cesspool where civic virtue has been lost. "*What remains is elite self-interest masquerading as civic virtue*" (Hugh Smith 2021). This is arguably the most important factor in preventing the United States from reversing its decline.

- The position of the United States has been reversed viz a viz the Soviet Union in some important manners. Examples, as noted by retired Canadian intelligence analyst (who focused on the Soviet Union) Patrick Armstrong (Armstrong 2020),
 - During the Cold War the Soviet Union blocked our broadcasts and we didn't care about theirs, now we rail about "Russian disinformation," and they are open to everything.
 - The Soviet Union made it difficult to "visit Rome", now it's easy to visit Russia and see for yourself.
 - then the Soviet Union censored what people could read and see, now we do;
 - the Russians know now that the delusion of exceptionalism is a dead end, we don't.
 - the gerontocracy of the Brezhnev era is now matched by the American one.

Supportive Client States

- Turkey, a NATO member has purchased Russian Air Defence systems despite strenuous objections by the US. A decision such as this would have been unthinkable even a couple of years ago.
- Despite years of aggressive US diplomacy, including the imposition of sanctions (and threats to impose more) the Nord Stream Two gas project supplying Russian natural gas to Germany and other countries will be completed.
- There are clear differences between Europe and the US on how to approach the rise of China. The recent G7 meeting highlighted this and the inability of the US to force some of its major allies to approach China in the same aggressive manner. The withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA on Iran's nuclear program is another example where there are major differences of opinion. The United States has a reputation for being 'non-agreement capable.'
- Extra-territorial sanctions imposed by the United States are becoming increasingly unpopular with its allies. For example, a senior German Government official stated that "Washington is treating the EU as an adversary. It is dealing the same way with Mexico, Canada, and with allies in Asia. This policy will provoke counter-reactions across the world" (Pancevski & Norma 2019).
- The US shows little respect for its allies. Recent examples include:
 - A Freedom of Navigation Operation in waters claimed by India (Purohit 2021).
 - The assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, which placed Australian and troops from other US allies at risk from Iranian retaliation without informing these countries of the decision.
 - The recent withdrawal of US troops from Bagram airbase where they appear to have left in the middle of the night without even informing the Afghan military.
- The ability of the United States to formulate and implement effective foreign policy has been significantly weakened by the primacy of the military as well as the disempowerment and diminishing expertise of the State Department (Farrow 2018; Burns & Thomas-Greenfield 2020).

It appears that the United States is following the same trajectory of decline and fall as all previous empires. It is difficult to develop a realistic and logically convincing argument where the United States can maintain its role as the global superpower given the multiple intertwined forces pushing it in the opposite direction. The model of collapse proposed by Tainter (1988) in his seminal work *The Collapse of Complex Societies* is relevant here. Tainter recognised that investment in complexity as a problem-solving response reaches a point of declining marginal returns. After this point is reached the cost to maintain a level of complexity is much greater than the benefit obtained and collapse, a

relatively rapid simplification in the organisation of society, becomes the most efficient method to address the imbalance. This dynamic can equally be applied to empires, the imperial system of the United States being no exception.

Important questions for Australia are how quickly will the United States decline and to what extent? These are questions which are generally not discussed (Scrafton 2021), at least publicly, in Australian defence and security circles.

The key implications for Australia of the decline of the United States imperial system are as follows:

1. Australia cannot assume that the United States will have the ability or desire to come to Australia's defence in a time of need.
2. The increasing belligerence of the United States towards Russia and China over recent years is a symptom of its decline. Declining powers can be exceedingly dangerous, making rash decisions (often for domestic political reasons) in a desperate attempt to maintain or regain their power. Thus, Australia's alliance with the United States risks us being drawn into a nihilistic and likely unwinnable conflict, most likely with China, that would be counter to Australia's national interest.

For the supporters of the alliance, the threat posed by China is regularly used to justify its importance. The question of whether China poses a threat to Australia will now be considered.

Is China a threat to Australia?

"To suggest that China would simply attack Australia because it could, with no strategic objective or national interest in mind, would be preposterous..... The very prospect of an assault on Australia in the foreseeable future is so remote as to be risible" (Scrafton 2021).

China is presented as the primary threat to Australia as evidenced by the relentless negative coverage of China's actions in the media and by leading politicians and even some public servants.

There is a long list of actions by which the China as threat narrative is justified. These include the militarisation of the South China Sea, increased belligerence towards Taiwan, the introduction of the National Security law in Hong Kong, border disputes, human rights abuses against ethnic minorities and economic coercion against countries which challenge China.

Before assessing some of these claims, it is important to understand the context in which the China as a threat narrative is framed. That context is the United States' policy of containment towards China. The first paragraph of the declassified 2018 U.S Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific states that *"How to maintain U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region while preventing China from new, illiberal spheres of influence"* is the primary National Security Challenge for the United States (United States Government 2018). This policy of containment towards China actually means obstructing China's rise (Valencia 2021). To achieve its desired end states, the Strategic Framework details numerous objectives and actions that are of direct relevance to Australia and this submission. They include:

- "communicating the strings attached to China's "Belt and Road Initiative.""
- "Strengthen the capabilities and will of Australia to contribute to the end states of this strategy."
- "Deepen trilateral cooperation with Japan and Australia."
- "Build an international consensus that China's industrial policies and unfair trading practices are damaging the global trading system."

- “Support activists and reformers throughout the region.”
- “denying China sustained air and sea dominance inside the “first island chain” in a conflict” and “dominating all domains outside the first island chain.”

Whilst it may be argued that the Strategy is a Trump administration document, there does not appear to be any significant difference between the details contained within the Strategy and the Biden administration’s approach to China. Any differences are in form rather than substance.

The conclusion to be drawn from this Strategy and current events is that the United States is employing all facets of its national power (including informational, diplomatic, economic and military) to constrain the rise of China. The current strategy builds on more than a century of US efforts to exploit and contain China as described by James Bradley (2015) in *The China Mirage*. Given the long history of US interference in the affairs of other nations it can be assumed that the implementation of this Strategy will include a range of measures from open and legitimate actions to covert operations that contravene the norms of international behaviour and the United Nations Charter.

A brief review of the context missing in most Australian coverage of the militaristic allegations of Chinese aggression is provided below.

- **The South China Sea.** China’s “Century of Humiliation” resulted from the “barbarians” (Britain, France and other European powers) exploiting China’s maritime vulnerability through the South China Sea. This lesson has been well learned by China’s strategists and the militarisation of the South China Sea is the result. Given the United States’ open acknowledgement of its intent to deny China domination within the “first island chain”, the dozens of US military bases ringing China, and the critical dependence by China on its maritime lines of communication, the militarisation of the South China Sea can be largely, if not primarily be seen as a defensive posture. Whilst China’s sovereignty claims over the South China Sea do appear excessive, Taiwan maintains the same claim, a fact rarely mentioned.
- **Belligerence towards Taiwan.** The status of Taiwan is a major unresolved issue from the Chinese Civil War with the independence of Taiwan being a long held “red-line” for China. Despite the many decades of tensions, China is Taiwan’s largest trading partner with deep economic and cultural links. A more accurate assessment of current heightened tensions is a dangerous three-way game of brinkmanship rather than a near term threat of a Chinese invasion (Culver 2020). This is evidenced by the large sums invested by Taiwan in influential Think Tanks (Macleod 2021), coinciding with the increasingly negative and bellicose coverage of China over recent years.
- **Border conflicts.** Whilst border tensions between China and its neighbours are generally framed as being cases of Chinese aggression, the reality is much more complex (Purohit 2020). The nub of the issue is that portions of China’s border with India have not been demarcated. Each side has differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control resulting in incursions by both sides as acknowledged by both previous and current Chiefs of the Indian Army Staff (Singh 2017; FP Staff 2021).

Of course, it would be naïve to think that all of China’s action are benevolent or that China does not bear some responsibility for current tensions. Whilst its actions in the South China Sea can be partly explained as a defensive reaction, there is no doubt that the economic resources of that vast area also factor into China’s calculus as an example.

However, when all of the contextual factors are considered the China as aggressor narrative does not stand up to serious scrutiny. China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty over the last few decades by avoiding military conflict. As stated by former UK Ambassador, Diplomat and historian Craig Murray, *“I cannot think of any instance in world history of any power enjoying the level of economic dominance currently enjoyed by China, and yet showing such restraint and lack of interest in Imperial conquest”* (Murray 2021b). The fear of Chinese aggression could also be considered as a case of projection. For example, former US Ambassador and Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman has stated that *“we should not assume just because the United States had the Monroe Doctrine and manifest destiny that China does too”* (Kolitch 2021).

If the positions of China’s actions are flipped with that of the United States, then the Chinese aggression narrative becomes even more illogical, if not irrational. It is after all not China sailing aircraft carriers in the Florida Keys, or building military bases in Canada, Mexico and Panama. China has not been in a war since 1979. China does not carry out drone strikes in dozens of countries around the world, nor does its economic coercion cost tens of thousands of lives by limiting access to basic medicines, and it does not assassinate military leaders of foreign countries. The China as aggressor narrative is clearly part of the United States’ strategy of containment towards China, rather than a realistic portrayal of China’s actions and ambitions.

China (and Russia) do however pose a threat to the United States, but it is not the threat that is discussed by Western politicians, media and commentators. China and Russia are a threat because of what they are rather than what they do. The actual ‘threat’ posed by Russia and China is to the United States’ global hegemony (Leckie 2020b), or as stated in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the ‘strategic primacy of the United States.’ This is something that appears intolerable for the leadership of the United States and incomprehensible for many of Australia’s politicians, defence leadership and commentators.

There is no doubt that the rise of China poses major challenges to the international system. This does not however automatically imply that China poses a threat to Australia. As forcefully argued by former Chief of the Defence Force, Angus Houston, *“China is our partner. China is not an enemy”* (Hurst 2020). It is clearly in the national interest to avoid China becoming our enemy.

The most likely path for China to become Australia’s enemy is through the alliance with the United States. The alliance is largely responsible for the current low ebb of Australia’s relationship with China. Our approach to China would be far more nuanced and diplomatic, like the majority of Asian nations, if Australia had a truly independent foreign policy. Unfortunately, Australia has for the moment essentially boxed itself into a lose – lose situation with regards to the United States and China.

The most probably future scenario is that China becomes the world’s largest and most powerful economy whilst the power and wealth of the United States declines, perhaps significantly. In this scenario, not only will the United States’ ability to support Australia from a security perspective be markedly reduced, but Australia’s alliance with the United States is/will be highly detrimental to our relationship with China. In effect Australia could very well end up in a situation where we face our own “century of humiliation” (Leckie 2020a).

On the other hand, it is unclear what the results of a successful outcome of a campaign to contain China would look like. China, as evidenced by President Xi’s recent speech on the 100th birthday of the CPC, is and will continue to resist this campaign mightily. There is a very real chance that military conflict may result, with the potential for major damage to the economies of the nations involved,

including Australia (Uren 2021). Even if conflict does not result, the successful containment of China could well damage, perhaps permanently, the major engine of global economic growth. It would appear that the successful containment of China could be a pyrrhic victory from Australia's perspective.

For the sake of Australia's future prosperity, sovereignty and security it is critical that Australia restores a functioning relationship with China across, at the very least, diplomatic and economic realms. This does not appear possible whilst Australia maintains its alliance with the United States. Before proposing an alternate defence strategy for Australia, it is worth considering how we reached our current situation with regards to China, by analysing the impact of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) on Australia's relationship with China.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)

ASPI describes itself as an:

"independent, non-partisan think tank that produces expert and timely advice for Australian and global leaders. ASPI generates new ideas for policy makers, allowing them to make better-informed decisions. ASPI is one of the most authoritative and widely quoted contributors to public discussion of strategic policy issues in the Indo-Pacific region and a recognised and authoritative Australian voice in international discussion on strategic, national security, cyber, technology and foreign interference issues."

ASPI aims to be influential in Australia's strategic policy sphere. ASPI's current Corporate Plan (Australian Strategic Policy Institute 2020) details some of the metrics used to gauge its influence, including:

- Works being published in prominent international journals (e.g. Foreign Affairs) and newspapers (e.g. the New York Times).
- Participation in government advisory committees and expert panels
- Citations in official government documents and speeches
- Published opinion pieces in major Australian media outlets
- Media coverage by ASPI experts.

ASPI has been very successful in this regard. Its senior leadership are regularly published in major media outlets such as *The Australian*, as well as being a 'go to' sources for commentary on strategic matters by major TV and radio outlets. The Government also values ASPI's advice as demonstrated by comments from the former Minister for Defence, Linda Reynolds, who stated in July 2020 that '*Peter [Jennings] and his team are critically important contributors to our national defence and also to our security dialogue.*' The current Defence Minister Peter Dutton has also reaffirmed the importance of ASPI from the Government's standpoint. From these perspectives, ASPI is performing well.

However, when it comes to how well ASPI serves Australia's national interests, a very different picture arises. In particular, ASPI can be rightly criticised for:

- being a source of misinformation and in some cases disinformation.
- providing poor quality advice, as opposed to the 'expert and timely advice,' that has contributed to Australia's deteriorating security environment.
- participating in 'grey-zone' operations targeted primarily at China.

The basis for this criticism is provided below.

Misinformation and disinformation

The primary tool of misinformation used by ASPI is a technique, known as the ‘power of leaving out’ (Lawrence 2014) where important details such as historical context, causality, timelines, motives and responsibilities behind events are omitted. In doing so a narrative can be created which can be used to manipulate the reader. This technique is regularly used by ASPI. Two examples are provided below:

- In 2016, ASPI published a Special Report titled ‘*Why Russia is a Threat to the International Order,*’ which I have critiqued elsewhere (Leckie 2016). The report is disingenuous in many regards. In particular, after reviewing Russian military operations in Syria, it claims that “*Russia’s use of military force in Syria is a clear demonstration of Putin’s aggressive conduct of foreign policy.*” This claim is problematic from many perspectives. For example, it ignores:
 - attempts by Russia to work with the United States in partnership in Syria prior to the Russian military deployment in 2015, attempts that were rebuffed by the United States.
 - the fact that the UN recognised Government of Syria requested military support from the Russian Government (in other words a legal and legitimate deployment of military forces as defined by the UN Charter).
 - the likelihood that if the Russian military had not deployed to Syria that ISIS and other militant groups could have taken over all of Syria within months.
 - the fact that the United States has deployed (and still does) military forces into Syria without a request from the Syrian Government nor authorisation via a UN Security Council Resolution. The US deployment/occupation of parts of Syria is illegal under international law, and as such is a much more accurate example of the aggressive conduct of foreign policy.
- In March 2018, an article was published at the ASPI Strategist on the alleged poisoning of the Skripal’s in the United Kingdom (Shoebridge 2018). The credulous article accepted without question the highly questionable narrative presented by the British Government (see Slane (2020) and Murray (2021a) for a comprehensive review of the holes in the British Government’s narrative on the Skripal poisoning). It made claims that Russia was the only ‘party with the particular capability’ to attack the Skripal’s and Russia was the only party with a ‘motive for doing so.’ These and other statements/claims in the article were demonstrably false at the time. For example:
 - As late as 2016, a leading chemist at the UK’s Chemical Weapon’s facility had an article published in a prestigious journal (Black 2016) that questioned the existence of ‘Novichok’ class nerve agents. Yet less than two years later the British Government is unequivocal in its claim that the Skripal’s were poisoned by a ‘Novichok.’
 - The primary source on ‘Novichok’ nerve agents was a dissident Russian military scientist, Vil Mirzayanov. Mirzayanov published a book in 2008, still available on Amazon, which included the chemical formula’s for Novichok’s. Additionally, the chemical weapon facility where he worked was in Uzbekistan, not Russia, and was dismantled with the assistance of the United States. These factors indicate that multiple parties, not just Russia, could have created the Novichok nerve agent. To claim otherwise is at best disingenuous, at worse deceptive.
 - Reports were circulating in the media after the incident that Sergei Skripal was a close associate of the former MI6 agent Christopher Steele, the author of the ‘Trump Dossier’ (Smith 2018). There is speculation that Skripal may have been one of Steele’s sources. This dossier played a key role in the ‘Russiagate’ allegations throughout President Trump’s presidency. This indicates that there are other parties who may have had a motive for poisoning Mr Skripal other than just the Russians.

For the sake of brevity only two examples have been provided. It is unclear why ASPI produces/publishes material that is misleading. It could be just a case of sloppy research and a lack of critical thinking. Or it could be the case that the ideological bias of ASPI staff/authors influences what they write and leads to a cherry picking of information to support preformed conclusions. Either way, for an organisation that professes to provide expert advice it is extremely concerning.

Involvement in 'grey-zone' operations

In recent years the discussion of 'grey-zone' operations has become increasingly common. These operations are "*activities involve military and non-military forms of assertiveness and coercion aimed at achieving strategic goals without provoking conflict*" (Commonwealth of Australia 2020). Most often, grey-zone operations are attributed to "authoritarian" or "revisionist" powers, namely China and Russia. The Chief of the Defence, General Angus Campbell (Campbell 2019), has argued that the Western world has rejected the notion of political warfare (a term used synonymously with grey-zone operations).

Such a view is not however, supported by the evidence. Western countries, led by the United States are the world's leading exponents of grey-zone operations. From Syria, to Venezuela, Ukraine, Belarus and Hong Kong, to cite just a few examples, the United States and its allies routinely conduct grey-zone operations to further their geo-political objectives. A range of techniques are used including the imposition of economic sanctions, funding and support of opposition groups, extensive use of media for promulgation of disinformation and propaganda, targeted use of violence, and false-flag operations/provocations.

Whilst ASPI has never, to the best of my knowledge, acknowledged Western grey-zone operations, it has published numerous articles and reports on Russian and Chinese grey-zone operations and how Australia should respond to them. ASPI even holds Masterclasses aimed at countering grey-zone operations and disinformation.

General Campbell's (Campbell 2019) description of political warfare includes the following:

"It penetrates the mind.

It seeks to influence, to subdue, to overpower, to disrupt ...

It can be covert or overt, a background of white noise or loud and compelling."

Based on this definition a case can be argued that ASPI is itself an active participant in grey-zone operations, operations that are directed against both target countries (in particular China and Russia), as much as they are against the Australian public and policy makers.

ASPI's participation in grey-zone operations take two forms. The first being the general tone of its published work/media outreach and the content it does, and just as importantly, does not cover. The second being targeted activities that seek to undermine other countries.

The general tone of ASPI's general coverage of target countries, such as Russia and China, is characterised by its:

- Persistent negative coverage. Virtually all commentary about Russia and China is highly critical or has a negative bias. It is of course reasonable to be critical of any country where its actions deserve to be criticised. However, when every article, comment or publication is critical, without exception, this suggests that the underlying intent/motive is to reinforce a particular view of a country rather than provide an accurate analysis.

- No positive coverage. As the converse of the previous point, there is no positive coverage (and little coverage that could even be considered neutral) about target countries. A recent example is provided in Michael Shoebridge's commentary on the 100th birthday of the Chinese Communist Party where he turns a positive (China's lifting of hundreds of millions of people out of poverty over the last few decades) into a negative: "*despite China only now lifting the last of its population out of extreme poverty into plain old poverty*" (Shoebridge 2021).

Repetition is a well-known and commonly used propaganda technique, a technique that ASPI continually uses with regards to Russia and China.

In stark contrast is ASPI's coverage of countries which are allied with Australia. Even when these countries conduct actions of the most egregious nature, criticism is at best muted, or in most cases totally ignored.

One example of many is the reaction to the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. General Soleimani was assassinated by the US military whilst on a diplomatic mission to Iraq (to meet the Iraqi Prime Minister), an assassination that also killed senior members of Iraq's Popular Military Forces. Richard Falk, Professor Emeritus of International Law, has labelled the assassination as not only a violation of international human rights law but an 'act of war' that violated the UN Charter. The assassination resulted in Iran firing rockets at US bases in Iraq and had the potential to trigger a regional conflict. It also placed Australian troops deployed to the Middle East at risk whilst the United States did not forewarn Australia of its intentions.

By any reasonable test, the assassination of Soleimani is an event that could rightly be expected to draw criticism from commentators on strategic policy matters. ASPI's Executive Director discussed the aftermath of the assassination in both ASPI's regular podcast and in an article (Jennings 2020a). There was however no commentary in either which could be construed as criticism of the assassination. An interesting thought experiment is to ponder the reaction by ASPI if Russia, for example, was to assassinate a senior NATO General in Brussels. The lack of criticism of Australia's allies when it is clearly warranted is another indicator that ASPI is an organisation where ideology matters more than honest analysis in the national interest.

The prime example of ASPI's involvement in grey-zone operations that seek to undermine and disrupt is its focus on the treatment of Uyghurs in China. ASPI has published many articles relating to this issue including three reports, *Mapping Xinjiang's 're-education' camps* (Ryan et al. 2018) *Uyghurs for Sale* (Xu et al. 2020) and *Strange bedfellows* (Zhang et al. 2021). The accusations against China made in these reports are extremely serious. For example:

"Since 2017, more than a million Uyghurs and members of other Turkic Muslim minorities have disappeared into a vast network of 're-education camps' in the far west region of Xinjiang,10 in what some experts call a systematic, government-led program of cultural genocide.11 Inside the camps, detainees are subjected to political indoctrination, forced to renounce their religion and culture and, in some instances, reportedly subjected to torture.12 In the name of combating 'religious extremism',13 Chinese authorities have been actively remoulding the Muslim population in the image of China's Han ethnic majority." (Xu et al. 2020)

Whilst I am not in the position to comment on the mistreatment or otherwise of Uyghurs by the Chinese authorities, there are multiple concerns with the ASPI's coverage of this issue that indicate that this issue is being 'weaponised' against the Chinese Government rather than being motivated over actual concerns for human rights.

The first question is why is ASPI covering this issue in such depth in the first place? It has obviously invested serious resources to produce these reports. Yet ASPI is a strategic policy institute, not a human rights organisation, nor an activist organisation. It has not covered allegations of human rights abuses in other countries, such as India in Kashmir or Israel in Gaza, superficially and without the critical and strident claims that have been made against the Chinese Government. This leads to the conclusion that ASPI has covered this issue as it can be used to further the United States led geopolitical objectives against China.

Normally, extraordinary allegations require extraordinary evidence to support a claim. There are however serious flaws in some of ASPIs work which question the conclusions that have been drawn. Some examples of these flaws are provided below:

- **Adrian Zenz.** ASPI has specifically thanked Adrian Zenz and referenced his work in their reports (Ryan et al. 2018). Zenz is one of the primary sources of allegations of the Uyghur genocide. Zenz has been described as a ‘right-wing religious extremist,’ who believes in the ‘rapture’ (on which his first book was published), condemns homosexuality, is an anti-Semite and against gender equality. There are also major concerns about his academic integrity and research methods (Porter & Blumenthal 2021; Steinbock 2021). Professor Lyle Goldstein, a China specialist at the US Naval War College has stated that ‘Zenz’s labeling of the Chinese approach to the Uyghurs as “demographic genocide” is “ridiculous to the point of being insulting to those who lost relatives in the Holocaust.”’ (Porter & Blumenthal 2021). By any normal academic standards Adrian Zenz would be dismissed as an unreliable source. The fact that ASPI has relied upon his work is thus extremely concerning.
- **Terrorism.** A review of ASPIs coverage of the Uyghur issue identifies no mention of the terrorism threat and associated violence faced by China in Xinjiang Province and elsewhere from Uyghur separatists, such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). According to the United Nations Security Council (United Nations Security Council 2011) it is associated with Al-Qaeda and has used violence on multiple occasions in seeking to set up an independent “East Turkistan” within the Xinjiang region of China. Additionally, several thousand Uyghur militants are reported to be fighting against the Syrian Government (Volodzko 2016), which is of great concern to the Chinese Government. The ‘re-education’ camps which ASPI has focused on are part of the Chinese Government’s response to what appears to be a very real terror threat (apparently there has been no terrorist incidents in Xinjiang since the counter-terrorism and deradicalization program commenced, compared to 800 deaths in the ten years to 2017 (Bardon 2020)). Whilst there are legitimate concerns about how this response has been handled, for ASPI to ignore the terror threat and the effectiveness of the response entirely in its analysis, another example of the ‘power of leaving out,’ further highlights the underlying geopolitical motivations behind this work. The cynicism of this approach is perfectly highlighted by the following comment taken from a YouTube video:

*We killed Muslims in Afghanistan,
We killed Muslims in Iraq,
We killed Muslims in Syria,
But we are very concerned about the human rights of Muslims in Xinjiang.*

- **Erroneous analysis.** There appears to be multiple errors in the ASPI reports *Uyghurs for Sale* (Xu et al. 2020) and *Mapping Xinjiang’s ‘re-education’ camps* (Ryan et al. 2018). For example:
 - The footwear manufacturer Skechers response to the ASPI report indicated that no evidence of forced labour in its factories had been identified which could be

considered as directly or indirectly benefiting from forced labour. Skechers response detailed an extensive series of announced and unannounced audits to ensure that the factory had been meeting its Supplier Code of Conduct over several years (Skechers USA Inc 2021). Several other companies have released similar statements.

- Many of the claimed 're-education' facilities are actually used for legitimate/normal purposes including government offices, schools, factories and gated communities (Bardon 2020).
- An anecdote from Jerry Grey, an expatriate who has lived in China for many years and travelled extensively throughout Xinjiang Province, described a message exchange between himself and an ASPI employee. The ASPI employee declared that based on his analysis of satellite imagery, Jerry was physically at the location of a prison site that was not there (Argall 2021).
- Whilst these 'errors' don't necessarily discount all of the claims made by ASPI, it does suggest indicate that at the very least their findings maybe exaggerated and/or unreliable. ASPIs publications do appear however to follow a trend which ignores evidence which may undermine the conclusions that have been drawn. There have been a number of examples of studies which question the narrative presented by ASPI, but it appears that these have been studiously ignored. For example, a report by the *Transational Foundation for Peace and Future Research*, based in Sweden, examining the origins of the Uyghur genocide narrative found that:

"It's the product of cooperation by at least six, more or less inter-connected, interest groups: Christian fundamentalism + hawkish U.S. foreign policy + Muslim Brotherhood circles (Ahmed Alwani) + extreme anti-Communism + pro-Israel circles + the human rights political machinery (in favour of pro-war/humanitarian intervention). They are all Near-governmental rather than Non-governmental. What combines them is a negative attitude, bordering on hatred, of Russia, Iran, China and a Sinophobic ideology on the one hand and pro-US world dominance/ interventionism on the other." (Dumoulin et al. 2021)

- **Response to those questioning the narrative.** Whilst there is very little coverage in Western mainstream media, there are a large number of individuals and organisations that question the narrative of Chinese mistreatment of Uyghurs, many of whom have large followings on social media and some of which live in China and have visited Xinjiang province in recent years. ASPI has focused on some of these sources in its report *Strange Bedfellows* (Zhang et al. 2021) which seeks to delegitimise alternative media organisations who question the narrative of Uyghur repression (see Leckie (2021a) for a review of this ASPI report). What is interesting in the approach taken by ASPI is that it does not question or counter the evidence/arguments proffered, in this case by *The Grayzone* media organisation, but rather insinuates that these organisations/individuals are in cahoots with the Chinese Government because they have either appeared on Chinese state media and/or Chinese Government officials have re-shared their articles on social media. This neo-McCarthyite approach is a grave threat to both our democracy (including free speech) and good policy making.
- **Circular arguments.** Whilst primarily funded by the Australian Government, ASPI also receives significant funding from the US and UK Government's and various arms manufacturers (Reubenstein 2021). This results in a situation where:
 - Foreign governments and arms manufacturers, who have a vested interested in generating the China as threat narrative, fund an 'independent' organisation – ASPI.
 - ASPI release reports on a topic (Uyghur repression) which can be used to target China (e.g. lead to the imposition of sanctions and trade embargoes).
 - These reports are publicised as 'independent' evidence in articles from internationally influential media outlets, such as the Washington Post (Fifield 2020), which are essentially mouthpieces for US foreign policy.

- No mention of the obvious conflict of interests or motivations of the organisations involved is disclosed.

The geopolitical nature of this coverage, the faux concern over human rights and outright hypocrisy of ASPI, is also evidenced by many of the companies who fund its work themselves using slave labour in the former of prisoners paid at rates as low as 23 cents an hour (Reubenstein 2020).

Summary

It is reasonable to expect that a strategic policy institute would take a coldly analytical approach to its operations. This would include exploring issues, the majority of which are very complex, from a variety of perspectives, incorporating a broad range of sources and opinions. Evidence would be critically evaluated, and on-balance reasoned judgements made where the facts are unclear or in doubt. Potential bias and uncertainties would be made explicit. Perhaps most importantly, it is expected that the organisation would always act in the national interest. As has been demonstrated, ASPI, particularly when it comes to China, Russia and the United States, fails in all of these expectations.

ASPI's operations indicate an organisation that is ideologically driven. The ideology being the unquestionable primacy of the United States, and Australia's alliance with the United States. This is the prism through which the vast majority of ASPI's staff, particularly its senior executives appear to view the world. This ideology is a filter through which ASPI's outputs are produced and may go a long way to explaining the evident bias in its communications and the reliance upon such dubious sources as Adrian Zenz. The rise of China and its ally Russia and the declining power of the United States appears to be incomprehensible to ASPI's leadership, the resulting cognitive dissonance evidenced by what appears to be a hatred of these countries in the writings of Peter Jennings and Michael Shoebridge as examples.

ASPI is a fundamentally conflicted organisation due to its funding arrangements. Its seeking and acceptance of funding from foreign governments and arms manufacturers is not to the benefit of Australia. It is to the clear benefit and interests of those governments and arms manufacturers. To put it somewhat crassly:

"The policy wonks in Washington, who made you their lapdogs, didn't throw you a bone because they thought you were smart, they threw you the bone because they knew you were dumb enough to catch it!" (Reubenstein 2021).

It is a rare occasion indeed where any of ASPI's outputs could be viewed as even being slightly critical of the foreign policy of Australia's allies or arms manufacturers. The near perfect correlation between the interests of ASPI's funding sources and its outputs severely undermine its claims to independence. Lecturer at RMIT Binoy Kampmark summarises this fundamental contradiction, in relation to ASPI, where he states:

"The security think tank often acts as an operational mercenary. The funders want advice that confirms and affirms a position; the advising think tank wants continued funding. Such a match is a poison for contrarian assessments" (Kampmark 2020).

ASPI's claim to expert advice on strategy is also dubious. I would argue that on the whole ASPI does not actually provide advice on strategy to the Government. What it routinely offers is justifications for the acquisition of additional military capabilities and/or spending to counter threats (spending that benefits its corporate sponsors), many of which have been amplified or exaggerated by ASPI. These justifications rarely if ever explain how the major additional spending can be funded or the

opportunity cost to other challenges that Australia faces. In doing so ASPI is also missing in action when it comes to the main game, namely how does Australia manage the likely decline of the United States (Scrafton 2021). By ignoring this very real prospect, and continuing its aggressive anti-China stance, ASPI is clearly acting against the national interest, the consequences of which may well negatively impact Australia's security and prosperity for decades to come (Leckie 2020a).

It is for these reasons that I have described ASPI as a 'Tabloid Think Tank' (Leckie 2021c). I am not alone in the well-deserved criticism of ASPI. Numerous other commentators, many of whom have held senior positions in the highest levels of Government, are also highly critical. This includes Bob Carr, Mike Scrafton, Bruce Haigh, Dennis Argall, John Menadue, Tony Kevin, Gregory Clark, Michael McKinley, Marcus Rubenstein, Geoff Raby, Scott Burchill and others. The Australian Citizens Party has extensively documented the flaws in ASPI's coverage of the Uyghur issue.¹ ASPI is also regularly criticised, and the flaws in its analysis revealed, in the international alternate media, examples including The Grayzone media outlet, American comedian and current affairs commentator Lee Camp, as well as popular vloggers Daniel Dumbrill and the Barrett family. That this criticism rarely, if ever, makes it to the 'mainstream' highlights the influence of ASPI. ASPI rarely, if ever, responds to the criticisms levelled against it. When it does so, rather than addressing the substance of these criticisms, it prefers *ad hominem* attacks against those who criticise it (Jennings 2020b). This is an indicator that many of the positions espoused by ASPI cannot be defended on their merits.

Conclusion

The broad conclusions that can be drawn from this submission are as follows:

- Australia cannot rely upon the United States for its security for several reasons. Firstly, the United States will act in its interests, not Australia's. In the years ahead there will likely be a growing divergence of interests. This is due to what appears to be the accelerating decline of the United States imperial system. As a result, the capacity for the United States to provide for Australia's security is also likely to diminish. Additionally, Australia maybe be drawn into a military conflict, most likely with China, because of the alliance, as the United States becomes increasingly desperate to arrest its decline/contain China.
- Hugh White in *How to Defend Australia* (White 2019) makes the entirely defensible argument that several countries, China amongst them, pose a strategic risk to Australia (the United States could also be considered a strategic risk). This is however a very different claim to that of China being a threat. The analysis that has been presented indicates that China is not a threat to Australia, but that Australia's alliance with the United States is effectively placing us in a lose-lose situation with regards to China where it can become a very real threat. War with China, according to Hugh White, would be the biggest failure of statecraft in Australia's history.
- Recent polling (a sample of 600 Australians and 600 Taiwanese) by the Australia Institute indicates that almost as many Australians (42%) as Taiwanese (51%) think that China will attack their country soon (Behm et al. 2021). This quite incredible result can be attributed to several years of building anti-China rhetoric in the media and by certain politicians and public servants. A leader in generating anti-China feelings is the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. The analysis presented of ASPI's approach to China identifies an organisation that is ideologically driven, fundamentally compromised due to its funding arrangements, regularly presents misinformation, relies on unreliable sources and cherry picks data to support preformed conclusions. Most concerning of all however is its apparent active involvement in grey-zone operations that seek to support the United States containment of China whilst

¹ I have no affiliation with the Australian Citizens Party

also worsening Australia's relationship with China. These types of activities are certainly not in Australia's national interest.

The defence of the nation remains the first responsibility of the Australian Government. It is increasingly apparent however that the approach taken by successive Australian Government's since the end of World War Two through the alliance with the United States is no longer fit for purpose. We need an alternative approach.

Before briefly exploring an alternate defence strategy, it is necessary to explore some additional considerations. The first consideration is that no matter how much Australia can invest (realistically) in defence, we will never be in a position where we would be able to defeat a determined effort by a major power, such as China, if it decided to attack Australia. Secondly, the rate of technological change in military technologies is such that Australia will find it increasingly difficult to maintain a technological edge, or even technological parity with potential adversaries across the full range of military capabilities. The final consideration is that there are multiple mechanisms by which Australia could be defeated by a major power without a shot being fired. As argued by David Kilcullen, given our dependence on imported energy and other trade (particularly oil, the vast majority of which transits through the South China Sea), 'we would already be defeated' if an adversary appeared offshore. Former Chief of Staff to the Minister Defence, Mike Scrafton argues that 'deterrence is not practical.' He also highlights that those who argue for largescale investment in particular defensive capabilities miss a fundamental point. They assume that the adversary will attack Australia in a way that is convenient to defence planners – a strategic delusion (Scrafton 2021).

Given these considerations, it appears clear that the most effective method of defending Australia is to minimise the possibility of turning strategic risks into actual threats. Armed neutrality, when combined with a revitalisation of Australia's diplomatic efforts is a strategy which offers such an outcome. This strategy has been periodically discussed in Australia, most recently by Dr Albert Palazzo (2018) from the Australian Army Research Centre.

Switzerland is the country most commonly associated with armed neutrality but of more interest in the Australian context however is the case of Vietnam. Vietnam shares a land border with China and has been invaded by China numerous times over the centuries, the last time in 1979. In recent years Vietnam and China have had a number of incidents in the South China Sea. Yet despite all of the historical precedents and ongoing tensions, Vietnam's military spending as a percentage of GDP has remained around two per cent for a prolonged period of time. Its defence strategy (Lich 2019) is based upon three fundamental principles (the 'three noes'); no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil. Working within these three principles, Vietnam remains an active participant in international organisations, has established ties with more than 80 countries and hosts defence attaches from 49 countries as well as developing partnerships with 27 countries (Lich 2019). It is true that Vietnam has a difficult balancing act in managing its relationship with China but the same can be said of many countries who share borders or are in close proximity to a global or regional power.²

If Vietnam can maintain a strategy of armed neutrality when bordered by China, then there is no reason why Australia, with the geographic advantage of being thousands of kilometres from China cannot also successfully implement such a strategy. It is beyond the scope of this submission to explore how the transition to a strategy of armed neutrality could be implemented, however Bevan

² It could be argued that Vietnam's proximity to China has led to a much more nuanced and diplomatic approach to its relations with that country and this has been of great importance in the success of its armed neutrality strategy.

Ramsden (2021) has provided a sensible overview of how this could be achieved whilst Palazzo (2018) has explored how such a policy would fit into addressing both Australia's defence and adaptation to climate change.

Recommendations

To finalise this submission, I offer the following recommendations:

- The likely decline of the United States imperial system undermines one of the key assumptions underpinning Australia's current defence strategy. This issue needs to be considered at the forefront of defence strategy and policy development. Australia could find itself in a very difficult situation if the United States follows in the footsteps of the Soviet Union as it increasingly appears to be the case. At the very least Australia should be hedging its bets with regards to the future of the United States.
- Australia needs a more nuanced, rational and reasoned debate with regards to our relationship with China. As has been argued, Australia is boxing itself into a lose-lose situation with regards to China, an unenviable position largely of our own making. A significant factor and driving force in this deteriorating relationship is the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. The ideological nature of this organisation indicates that it is beyond reform. Professor Michael McKinley has argued that it should be decommissioned (McKinley 2021), a position I support. The decommissioning of ASPI could provide a necessary break point to re-establish diplomatic relationships with China. The resources currently allocated to ASPI could be redirected to DFAT, described as a 'sinking ship' by retired diplomat Bruce Haigh (2021), to enhance Australia's diplomatic capabilities that will become increasingly important into the future.
- Australia adopts a defence strategy of armed neutrality. This could be based on the same three fundamental principles of Vietnam's defence strategy. These principles being: no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign military bases. Further Australia's employment of military force should be applied strictly in accordance with the United Nations Charter. And finally military force should only be approved with the consent of the parliament (not just the Prime Minister, Cabinet or Government of the day). The adoption of these measures gives Australia the best opportunity for a sovereign, secure and prosperous future.

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