

Independent and Peaceful Australia (IPAC)

“Inquiry into costs and consequences of the US-Australia Alliance”

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1.0 Introduction

Foreign policy or diplomacy is best defined as “the pursuit of national interests” or, as some political scientists say, “national self-interest”.

For better, or worse, the interests of Australia and the United States are largely aligned. Given the alternatives, a close and workable relationship with the US is clearly in Australia’s national interest.

The US has for the best part of a century been both the dominant global economic power and either the sole or one of only two militarily dominant superpowers. Today the US is far and away the dominant military power in our region, a situation which is unlikely to alter in the short and probably well into the medium-term.

Whilst Australia’s eagerness to attach itself to US military excursions will be dealt with later in this submission, from a purely strategic standpoint, a military alliance with the US makes sense for Australia.

Australia is a trade reliant economy; most global trade is transacted in US dollars and it is the global reserve currency. The US is far and away the biggest foreign investor in Australia and, according to research from Clinton Fernandes at UNSW, fifteen of the top twenty ASX-listed companies in Australia are majority-owned by US shareholders.

There is cultural alignment between the two nations, both having been populated by masses of white European settlement with similar value systems and beliefs; having also developed similar political and judicial systems and sharing a common language.

Notwithstanding this fact, both nations are guilty of treating their non-Anglo ethnic minorities poorly and have shameful histories when it comes to the treatment of their indigenous peoples.

By and large the US States has and continues to a reliable ally to Australia. Indeed, it has been a far more reliable ally than, Australia’s once colonial rulers, Great Britain. That reliability does not mean the alliance always serves Australia’s interests, it does equate a relationship which has been stable, predictable and non-adversarial.

For the foreseeable future the US will remain the only viable, and reliable, major power to which Australia can ally itself.

Australia must, for economic reasons, rely on its Asian neighbours—in particular China. However, the lack of trust and understanding between Australia and China means Australia cannot rely on its biggest trading partner to be its biggest friend on the world stage.

Within government, sections of academia, mainstream media, the security establishment and policy-making circles there is enthusiastic support for continued close relations with the US.

There is an argument the Australia-US alliance, in and of itself, should not result in negative consequences for Australia. However, either by not knowing or not caring, Australian policymakers have run foreign policy on the presumption that US and Australian interests exist in a vacuum of indispensable joint-interest.

Australia is a middle power, and the United States is a great power. Great powers act in their own self-interest. They do not tolerate belligerence from enemies, and one of their most useful foreign policy tools is to rarely cede meaningful concessions to friends.

Given Australia’s post-war—and particularly post-9/11—history there is nothing to suggest the United States would ever place Australia’s interests ahead of its own.

Since the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the actions of the Morrison Government suggest that Australia does not simply regard ceding our national interests as a cost of the US alliance. Rather Prime Minister Morrison treats it as an obligation, which he eagerly offered to the Trump Administration and now has found an equally receptive audience in the Biden Administration.

2.0 The noble US history with “little resemblance to reality”

In 2019, prominent US foreign policy commentator, Professor John Mearsheimerⁱ gave a notable address to, conservative Australian think tank, the CIS (Centre for Independent Studies). Part of his speech went thus:

“I’m going to tell you a story about the United States that most of you don’t know, certainly most Americans don’t know this story, because we have this idealistic story about noble America that bears little resemblance to reality.

“In 1783 the United States started out as thirteen measly colonies strung out along the Atlantic seaboard. What did we do? We marched across the continent to the Pacific Ocean, we murdered huge numbers of native Americans, we stole their land.

“We went to war with Mexico in the middle of the nineteenth century and we stole from Mexico what is now the southwest of the United States. We invaded Canada in 1812 for the express purpose of making Canada part of the United States.

“For those of you who don’t know the reason Toronto is not the capital of Canada and Ottawa is the capital of Canada, is they expected us to pay a return visit. Furthermore, in regards to the Caribbean, we’d own all the Caribbean now places like Cuba and Puerto Rico would be American states if it weren’t for the fact that it was inextricably tied up to the issue of slavery.

“And the northern states said we’re not going into the Caribbean, there’s too many slaves down there they are slave holding states, and we don’t want any more slave holding states.

“We had a voracious appetite for conquest. Adolf Hitler, when he went into the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, sometimes talked about imitating the Americans and their ability to conquer and gain territory.

“That’s how the United States was created an expansionist country like we’ve never seen on the planet before.”

Professor John Mearsheimer

“We’re not going to have any trouble mobilizing the American people, as you know the American government is brilliant when it comes to manipulating public opinion to support even cockamammy wars.”

The host of that event, CIS Executive Director Tom Switzer, summarized Mearsheimer’s argument in an opinion piece in the *Nine Newspapers*ⁱⁱ, writing, “If we [Australia] don’t support Uncle Sam in an increasingly intense rivalry with China, Australia will become an enemy.”

3.0 Australia’s eagerness to be manipulated

Professor Mearsheimerⁱⁱⁱ is far from an outlier in US policy circles. He is a graduate of the military academy at West Point, he holds a PhD from Cornell University and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University.

Mearsheimer is a leading advocate for the theory of neorealism^{iv} which essentially views the natural global order being one of conflict and power struggle with little room for compromise. He does not argue of the inevitability of a major conflict with China, he generally argues, as he did to the CIS in August of 2019, the prospect of conflict is “on the table.”

He also argued in that presentation, rather than being a rogue and expansionist dictatorship, China’s regional ambitions could be seen as an attempt to mimic the US hegemony over the Western hemisphere and Europe.

There is an argument, through initiatives such as China’s much maligned, and much misunderstood^v, *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* that China is dangling a carrot in front of the noses of its still economically developing regional neighbours.

China hawks in the west, and in particular Australia where they are supported by a willing mainstream media, call the BRI a debt trap in which China seeks to ensnare unsuspecting nations.

That theory, however, does not hold up well to considered scrutiny. Shahar Hameiri, Associate Professor of International Politics in the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, argued in a paper for the Lowy Institute^{vi} “Never attribute to malice what can be explained by incompetence”, under the headline of *Debunking the myth of China’s “debt-trap diplomacy”*.

Former Australian Ambassador to Beijing, Geoff Raby argued in his 2020 book, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in the New Global Order*, that China does not so much lack the will to

follow the US model of building a regional hegemony based on military supremacy. Rather China lacks the military capability, leaving economic leverage as the only viable tool in its foreign policy kit.

Raby further argues that Beijing faces four significant internal challenges that will not go away easily, Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan (an ethnically Han Chinese territory which was, for centuries prior to the establishment of the PRC, part of China).

Yet Australia, under the present Morrison government, seems to willingly accept the premise that China is a direct regional threat.

China is unquestionably flexing its muscles in such a way that regional powers should be concerned; but there is no logic as to why China would launch a first strike attack on a major trading partner like Australia.

Geographically, Australia is of insignificant strategic interest to China, there are no major trade routes, no territorial disputes and Australia's closest neighbours, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, all enjoy stable relations with China.

The security hawks in Canberra have constantly talked up China's potential to threaten Australia, but they have utterly failed to articulate why it would be in China's strategic interests to go to war with Australia?

4.0 Australia's history of failed diplomacy

As a middle power, since Federation, Australia has arguably been the most complete failure amongst its international peers, in recognizing and advancing its genuine national interests.

Until 1967, Australia's constitution did not even recognize the existence of indigenous Australians. With the exception of Scott Morrison (who was one year old at the time) every single Australian prime minister was born into a nation which gave no recognition to its indigenous population.

As for ties to the mother country?

At the time of Prime Minister Morrison's birth—and that of every one of his Cabinet ministers—*God Save the Queen* was Australia's national anthem.

For decades after Federation Australian clung to its British heritage and British institutions. Institutions such as our parliamentary democracy and our legal system have, by and large, served Australia well.

However, Australia's head of state is still the monarch of another nation. Even though the Queen's place in Australia nothing more than symbolic, the fact she is our head of state supports the argument that Australia's Anglo-based institutions play far too great a role in defining our national interests.

Though politicians, academics, authors and think tanks push a narrative that Australia's foreign policy is shaped by regional factors—namely an increasingly assertive China—the reality is our foreign policy is shaped by history not geography.

Australia's relations with other nation-states can be broadly placed into one of five baskets:

1. Large developed western nations which are strategic, and cultural, allies;
2. Non-western nation-states with real, or perceived, shared interests;
3. Smaller Pacific island-states and the Oceania region in which Australia, through its size and economy, is the logical leader;
4. Foreign policy agnostic nation states;
5. Asian trading partners.

Since Federation in 1901, Australia has, by and large, been an abject failure in managing those five distinct relationships.

In its simplest terms:

Australia is generally fearful of upsetting its western allies. As for other nations it is either contemptuous or culturally ignorant of their plight—often it is both.

Considering the nature of those relationships:

4.1 Large western allies Britain (1901-WW2) and the United States (post-WW2)

Australia has rarely, if ever, instituted meaningful policies that are in any way contrary to the interests of these two nations.

Australia has consistently been either fearful of its larger allies or, more likely, fearful of offending these great allies.

4.2 Non-western nation states with ‘shared’ interests

These are superficial foreign relations with nation states that have complementary economic or strategic interests. They are simply transactional relationships in which Australian foreign policy makers have no desire (or no remit) to develop any cultural understanding or ties.

Presently the Morrison government, has deliberately set about to build transactional regional relationships in the Indo-Pacific region for the express purpose of strategically and diplomatically opposing the People’s Republic of China.

4.3 Smaller Pacific Island and Oceania nation-states

In August 2021, PM Scott Morrison best summed up his government’s attitude towards its Pacific neighbours during a video conference of the Pacific Island Leaders Forum. Morrison has consistently refused Pacific Island pleas for greater action on climate change, a key issue at the forum. On top of that Morrison managed to insult his fellow leaders, by eating and drinking during the presentation of other heads of government^{vii}.

An even more shameful episode came in the bugging of the Timor-Leste Cabinet Office in 2004, so Australia could gain commercial advantage in oil and gas negotiations with its tiny impoverished northern neighbour. Those revelations came from the Australian Intelligence officer tasked with the bugging^{viii}.

The Morrison government prosecuted and convicted the whistleblower “Witness K” in a secret trial. His lawyer Bernard Collaery is also being prosecuted in another closed trial for advising his client who revealed the Australian bugging operation.

4.4 Foreign policy agnostic states

These are largely states in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America where Australia has no meaningful relations or interests.

Many of these nations have been subject to covert or overt interference by Australia’s major allies, populations in many of those countries suffer from appalling human rights abuses, while Australia remains largely silent.

4.5 Asian trading partners

China, with whom Australia eagerly concluded a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement in 2014, is the contemporary case in point. However, Australia has previously benefitted from substantial export relations with Japan from the 1970s and South Korea from the late 1980s.

All three relationships have been underscored by a lack of interest—let alone even a superficial curiosity—into the lives and cultures of these three east Asian nations.

Even before the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement was signed, the Lowy Institute published a paper in August 2014, which highlighted “Australian ignorance about China”^{ix}.

5.0 Australia the “lucky country”

For half a century Australia has called itself the “lucky country” an island continent with no land borders thus shielded from territorial disputes which plunged our migrant population’s European ancestors into endless wars.

We are blessed abundant natural resources, ideal weather, pristine coastlines, substantial export markets, almost uninterrupted economic growth and a safe and stable society.

This is not what journalist and author Donald Horne meant when he first coined the phrase in his seminal 1964 book, *The Luck Country*^x. It was a stark critique of what Australia had become, essentially a nation and society that had inherited its prosperity and done nothing to earn it.

The book’s title was derived from the opening line of the final chapter, which began thus:

Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second rate people who share its luck. It lives on other people's ideas, and, although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise.

Donald Horne (1964)

Within months of its outbreak, as Australia seemed to be leading the world in the handling of the pandemic, I was quoted by a leading Australian economist in April 2020, who wrote^{xi}, “As a journalist friend observed, ‘maybe Australia slipped on a banana peel just as the bullet was about to hit.’”

Though written more than half a century ago, Horne’s full ‘lucky county’ quote could so aptly apply to Australia in 2021.

The federal government’s international border mismanagement, inadequate quarantine measures, a dismally failed vaccine rollout, the utter failure of the New South Wales government in handling the June/July Delta outbreak—in both locking down too late and then wasting two weeks in not properly enforcing the lockdown.

To borrow from Donald Horne, these point to a country run by “second rate people” who, 18 months into a global pandemic, had been completely “taken by surprise.”

As they grapple with their mismanagement, Australia’s leaders continue to bandy about the expression that this is a “once in a century pandemic”.

That is a dangerous, and irresponsible, piece of political spin not because it is used to mask present failures. It is language that kicks the can of pandemic preparedness down the road—one hundred years down the road when our leaders are all long gone.

In September 2019, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, a joint World Bank and WHO board set up to monitor the world's preparedness for a global pandemic, published a comprehensive report. Entitled “A World at Risk” it was delivered to health departments and health ministers the world over—including Australia^{xii}.

Its stark warning was: “There is a very real threat of a rapidly moving, highly lethal pandemic of a respiratory pathogen... A global pandemic on that scale would be catastrophic, creating widespread havoc, instability and insecurity. The world is not prepared.”

Since that 2019 warning and the 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic Australia has failed to fully meet its short-term challenges and, most disturbingly, there has been no indication from the federal government that any resources will be devoted to combatting future pandemics.

6.0 The “lucky” weapons makers

Since 2020, the most substantive Australian government announcement in relation to future spending has been in one area alone—defence^{xiii}.

As with every major prime ministerial announcement since 2020, the complete details were leaked to the entire Canberra Press Gallery the day before the official announcement.

The ABC’s national affairs correspondent Greg Jennett filed a story under the headline: *The hundreds of billions being poured into Defence shows Morrison's done with the old world order.*^{xiv} That was a puzzling assessment, given the hundreds of billions was headed straight to weapons makers run by Australia’s World War Two allies.

news.com.au reported: *Australia defence budget: \$270b earmarked on new weapons, fleets, troops: The PM has announced billions will be spent on new hypersonic weapons, spy satellites and missile shields to keep intruders away from our waters.*^{xv}

Vocal China hawk, Peter Hartcher, who has advocated the policy that Mainland Chinese should be banned from migrating to Australia^{xvi}, wrote in the Nine Newspapers, “Australia has previously rejected an offer by the United States to deploy its own long-range missiles in Darwin, but has been investigating the option of buying about 200 of the Lockheed Martin missiles for its fleet of Super Hornets and possibly other aircraft. The purchase of the missiles - which can travel up to 370 kilometres - will cost about \$800 million.”^{xvii}

In saying the government was “investigating” options for these Lockheed Martin missiles, Hartcher was either quite deliberately reading directly from the PM’s Media Office briefing notes or was totally ignorant of the reality.

In February 2020, more than four months before mainstream media cheered on the Morrison announcement of an exciting future missile program, it had been reported by defence industry media the \$800 million deal with a US weapons maker had already been done.^{xviii}

This was not simply political spin out of the prime minister’s office, it laid down a clear position to the Morrison government:

1. Australia’s spending on weapons will climb to an all-time high;
2. Billions of those dollars are headed for US weapons makers; and
3. Despite being the source of a great part of Australia’s economic prosperity China is our enemy

Most disturbingly, the justification for the above rests far more in propaganda than in considered strategic policy development.

For the overwhelming majority of the Australian population the primary source of information about Australia’s defence and security challenges comes from the mainstream media. Publications and journalists who incapable of, or unwilling to, questioning any government announcements.

On 25 August 202, the ABC filed a report, based on pre-announcement briefing from the prime minister’s office, that: *Coronavirus economic struggles see Federal Government bring forward Defence Force projects spending.*^{xix}

The official announcement from the Defence Minister was, “The Morrison Government has announced a \$1 billion investment package to boost Australia’s defence industry and support thousands of jobs across the country.”^{xx}

Whilst a seemingly big headline number, as reported in APAC News on 1 September 2020^{xxi}, \$1 billion represents just 14 days of defence spending. Furthermore, analysis of Finance Department figures showed that of the of 24 largest contracts struck in the seven weeks before the announcement, 83 per cent (or \$2.2 billion went to foreign companies).

7.0 The United States of America and its “lucky” alliance

With the brief exception of the three years of the Whitlam government^{xxii} from December 1972 to November 1975, the United States has enjoyed an uninterrupted alliance with Australia. Rarely between any nation-states, it’s been an alliance never questioned by the junior partner.

Therein lies the greatest failure of Australia’s post-war foreign policy—a complete lack of political will to challenge the world view of the United States.

Add to that a naive lack of political understanding that US foreign policy, as the first words of this paper spell out, is grounded solely in the national interests of the United States.

It is worth noting that the term “post-war” is fast becoming redundant. For half a century in the realm of historical and foreign policy commentary “post-war” unambiguously referred to post-World War Two. Given the major US initiated conflicts since 1950 “post war” could mean any one of a number of periods of time.

From an Australian perspective, these US-led wars bear three striking characteristics:

1. All of the major conflicts ended in a loss for US-led coalitions or, at the very best, an ultimate stalemate;
2. Total US military casualties since the Korean War (1950-53) has numbered in the high tens of thousands, whilst military and civilian deaths in countries the US invaded number in the millions (some estimate 4 million civilians in Korea and Vietnam alone); and
3. Australia has followed the US into all of these wars.

Notably two of those conflicts, the Vietnam War and the second Gulf War of 2003, faced enormous public opposition. Opposition to the Vietnam War was countered by a Cold War political narrative of “reds under the bed” and the “domino theory” of Asian being enveloped by communism.

8.0 American propaganda: babies and WMDs

In the case of the 2003 Gulf War, totally manufactured intelligence reports on the existence of an Iraqi nuclear weapons program, was the pre-text which saw the Bush Administration in the US and Blair Government in the UK launch an invasion of Iraq. Australia willingly joined that conflict.

There was no weapons of mass destruction program, instead a US initiated war that left around 6,000 coalition troops dead^{xxiii}, among them four Australians.^{xxiv}

Since 2003, conservative estimates are that some 200,000 Iraqi civilians have died, mostly through sectarian violence^{xxv}. At the upper end, there are estimates of up to 400,000 civilian deaths in Iraq.^{xxvi}

Possibly one of the great bald-faced lies in modern times came as the US built a coalition to push Iraqi forces out of Kuwait in the first Gulf War of 1990. When a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl, identified only by her first name Nayirah, gave witness testimony^{xxvii} before the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus on October 10, 1990. She told the US Committee that she'd witnessed Iraqi soldiers remove infants from incubators in the neo-natal ward of a Kuwait Hospital, leaving them to die. It later transpired that not only had this girl not been in Kuwait, but she was the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States.

Her testimony was not only fabricated but she was coached to give that testimony by a US public relations firm, Hill & Knowlton, which had reportedly been paid \$US10.8 million by the Kuwaiti government to run a public relations campaign to garner western support for the war^{xxviii}.

Independent media watch group, *PR Watch* labelled the Kuwaiti government “The Mother of All Clients” for the worldwide public relations.

In the context of 2021 geopolitics, perhaps quite tellingly, the public relations manufactured testimony of Nayirah even garnered the support of Amnesty International^{xxix}

9.0 Mike Pezzullo’s bizarre “Drums of War”

On 25 April 2021, Mike Pezzullo the Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs released possibly one of the most bizarre statements to leave the desk of a senior public servant.

Within hours his *The Longing for Peace, the Curse of War*^{xxx} communique, dubbed his “Anzac Day Message”, it was renamed as the “Drums of War” speech.

Three days later, in an article for *The Mandarin*, Melissa Coade profiled the Home Affairs boss writing, “The back story on how mandarin Michael Pezzullo, a history-obsessed scholar, made his way to the top of the national security food chain in Canberra.”^{xxxi}

Pezzullo’s message read like a call to arms, something one might expect from a wartime prime minister or perhaps the Chief of the Defence Force, not from a bureaucrat in a non-military department. Though, as Coade noted, not just any bureaucrat, “Pezzullo was powerful long before he stepped up to lead Home Affairs.”

The absurdities of his Anzac Day message are numerous.

Pezzullo repeatedly evoked notions of war and of national service in a deliberately military tone— he has never served in the armed forces.

His use of language and terminology was bizarre, it came from the first half of the 20th century. He wrote of “sorrowful challenges” that “a nation’s warriors have but one dedicated purpose” and “as long as there persists tyranny’s threat to freedom they must remain armed, strong and ready for war, even as they lament the curse of war.”

And, in the great tradition of Prime Minister Morrison, it was aimed directly at Australia’s major trading partner, without once uttering the word ‘China’. He wrote, “By our resolve and our strength, by our preparedness of arms, and by our statecraft, let us get about reducing the likelihood of war – but not at the cost of our precious liberty.”

Pezzullo ended with reference to, “the host of the Dead whom we remember today”. Why would he capitalize the word “Dead” in the text of this speech?

In what was a message to mark the upcoming 70th Anniversary of the US-Australian military alliance he made just two references to military leaders, both of them American—General Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In his communique, marking seven decades of Australia’s most significant military alliance, there was not a single mention of any Australian military leader. Nor was there any reference to the Australians who’ve died on foreign soil in US-led wars.

Mike Scratfton, the Former Chief of Staff to Howard Government Defence Minister Peter Reith, later wrote, “Adherence to the cult of the warrior draws Pezzullo toward the now strategically irrelevant early Cold War thinking of generals who gained their experience in the Second World War.

“It inspires him to meaningless, pseudo-Churchillian statements about hearing the “drums of war beat” that are inconsistent with rational strategic policy language.”^{xxxii}

10.0 ASPI and the “drummer boys”

Arguably there has been no more successful group than that Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in advancing the cause of United States strategic and foreign policy as it relates to Australia.

ASPI is a very cleverly constructed propaganda machine and, without knowing its internal workings, the likely architect of that success is Executive Director, Peter Jennings. He is the third man to lead ASPI in its 20-year history and has presided over a massive increase in both the think tank’s revenue and its influence.

ASPI’s founding executive director, Professor Hugh White, who was at the helm for three years, seemingly adhered closely to the institute’s original charter, which was to challenge defence establishment thinking.

In White's final year, ASPI accepted just \$13,000 in sponsor contributions, relying on core funding from the Defence Department to underpin research. In the 2019-20 financial year that figure had ballooned to \$6.9 million.

ASPI is not required to report its total current financial year receipts until October. However, if contributions from weapons makers, foreign governments and others maintain their current level, ASPI is on track to post total revenue of \$14.9 million this financial year.

Last financial year, ending June 30, saw ASPI break a significant record because the tally of its virtually hidden Department of Defence contracts has now exceeded what it calls "core defence funding".

Each year ASPI is guaranteed a \$4 million grant from Defence, a grant that has always been the biggest single source of its funding. In the past 12 months, ASPI has been given additional Defence funding of \$5,149,93.80, a massive increase from the then record allotment of \$1.91 million in the previous year.

10.1 ASPI it's all "about us"

ASPI has a very particular way of describing itself backed up by claims of independence. The About Us section of the ASPI website says:

ASPI is 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 was established by the Australian Government in 2001 and is partially funded by the Department of Defence with other sources of revenue including sponsorship, commissioned tasks and event registration fees.

ASPI is not an independent organisation, it is a Commonwealth Company, which reports directly to the Minister for Defence.

Its claim of being non-partisan is true in so far as it does not openly align itself with one major party or the other. However, it was set up by the Howard government, it is run by Peter Jennings who is former senior adviser to the Howard government, and in the three years since Scott Morrison ascended to the prime ministership its total commonwealth funding has more than doubled.

ASPI has relationships across both major political parties, but its major financial patrons have been the Liberal National Parties.

10.2 ASPI's sponsors: What's in it for us?

Analysis of Department of Finance figures shows that the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's (ASPI) 12 weapons manufacturing sponsors have collected more than \$51 billion in government contracts since the think-tank was formed in 2001.

When current ASPI Executive Director Peter Jennings took up his position in 2011, the think tank generated around \$500,000 in revenue over and above the \$3.5 million annual grant it received from the government.

Last year ASPI collected nearly \$7 million in sponsorship and commercial revenue—this represents a 1,400% increase in less than ten years. ASPI's consistent public line is that groups paying it millions expect nothing in return.

A significant amount has come from the US government which has commissioned ASPI to write research reports attacking China; in the last reported financial year US annual payments to ASPI skyrocketed by 367%.

However, for ASPI's commercial and weapons sponsors it would appear their patronage is getting them access to senior military personnel and senior politicians.

In the last full year before the impact of COVID-19, ASPI hosted 142 events bringing together defence decision makers and defence suppliers.

One of those events, the "War in 2025" conference was sponsored by Thales, Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin; and then Defence Minister Linda Reynolds was a keynote speaker.

In its 2018-19 annual report, ASPI disclosed participants at that conference were given the opportunity to have "closed-door discussions with government departments and agencies."

Despite protestations of not coming under the influence of any of its financial backers, its own lodgements with the Attorney General's department reveals ASPI currently has 15 agreements in place with foreign governments and entities which require it to register with the Australia's foreign influence Transparency Register.

10.3 ASPI's "self-censorship"

One need look no further than the ASPI Wikipedia page to see how carefully it crafts its own image. The top of the ASPI page comes with this warning from Wikipedia in bold text:

This article has multiple issues.

This article relies too much on references to primary sources. (January 2017)

This article may rely excessively on sources too closely associated with the subject, potentially preventing the article from being verifiable and neutral. (March 2020)

Half of the Wikipedia page reference sources come directly from ASPI itself and all but one of the 21 sources either endorses or praises ASPI.

Much like the army of censors employed by the Communist Party of China to cleanse online criticism of the CCP, negative comments about ASPI are regularly deleted from its Wikipedia page

On 1 July 2021, the following paragraph was added to the ASPI Wikipedia page:

The former diplomat and commentator Bruce Haigh wrote in May 2021 that ASPI is the "preferred source of advice on China" for the Liberal–National Coalition, ahead of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence. He also argued that ASPI is exaggerating the threat China poses to Australia and its advice has resulted in China freezing Australia out of "significant bilateral trade, economic and diplomatic relationships".

Eight days later excerpt was removed, as was the reference to an opinion piece, critical of ASPI, Haigh had written for the *Canberra Times*.^{xxxiii}

There are numerous examples of publicly disclosed material questioning ASPI's independence and its funding which simply do not appear on its Wikipedia page. If they have appeared, they are scrubbed from the page quickly. These include:

Media reports and comments critical of ASPI; conflicted research where ASPI produces reports criticizing companies without disclosing sponsorship arrangements with their commercial rivals^{xxxiv}; arrangements between ASPI and journalists who give ASPI constant positive media coverage^{xxxv}; verified reports that at least ASPI sponsors have engaged in the use of forced labour or been involved in human rights violations^{xxxvi}; and reports which recommend the Australian government purchase military hardware from ASPI sponsors.

10.4 ASPI's credibility a "gold standard" myth

On the first page of ASPI's most recent annual report the think tank confidently declares:

"ASPI was again ranked as one of the world's best think tanks in the University of Pennsylvania's 2019 Global Go To Think Tank Index, which is the gold standard for annual assessments of think tanks' performance around the world."

This a classic example of the way ASPI cherry picks facts and comments in order to support a heavily biased narrative.

In an article published on the ASPI website^{xxxvii} it points to its rankings in the University of Pennsylvania's 2014 Global Go To Think Tank Index (GGTTI) as proof of its important work.

That was seven years ago, when ASPI was named the number two global 'think tank to watch', which prompted ASPI to call this the "gold standard of excellence for think tanks."

The 2020 GTTTI Report ^{xxxviii} ranks the *2020 Top Think Tanks Worldwide (non-US)* and ASPI is not one of the 154 entries.

There are 174 entries on a wider list which ranks all global think tanks, once again, ASPI does not make that list.

The situation in 2020 was very different, according to the “gold standard” GGTTI report ASPI doesn’t even make the top list.

ASPI gets its first mention on page 110 under the list of *2020 Top Think Tanks in South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific (excluding India)*. ASPI’s highest profile Australian peer, the Lowy Institute ranks 13 on that list, ASPI is ranked 60.

It rated 11th on the list of defence think tanks but only makes it to 59th place on the list of government-affiliated think tanks.

Perhaps embarrassingly for ASPI, this independent US survey gives higher ratings to no fewer than five Chinese-government backed think-tanks.

Though ASPI prides itself on its research integrity, among the *2020 Think Tanks with Outstanding Policy-Oriented Research Programs*, it ranks a lowly 57th.

Quite surprisingly, given its constant mainstream media coverage, it ranks in the bottom 20 per cent of think tanks for *2020 Best Use of Media (Print or Electronic)*.

Despite ASPI’s claim of its fierce independence, it only manages an 85th place among the *2020 Best Independent Think Tanks*. Amongst its peers in the Asia-Pacific ASPI ranks 60th.

11.0 China threat narrative

The considerable amount of space above is devoted to ASPI, because of the prior research done by APAC News on the think tanks. Also, it is ASPI which is at the forefront of this China threat narrative.

China is an increasingly authoritarian state which is actively asserting its authority regionally and within its own borders.

It is sensible policy for Australia to be prepared for China's rise and, where appropriate, hold China to account for its actions. However, there is no evidence that China's end-game is to pose a military or political threat to Australia.

The China hawk story that Australia's sovereignty is under threat from China is absurd alarmism.

Three years into Australia's tough, and far-reaching, Foreign Interference laws, there has yet to be one conviction, let alone a matter even reach the courts in relation to any alleged Chinese foreign interference in Australia.

Comprehensive research conducted by ANU Academic Dr Dirk van der Kley found key Chinese groups to have been a "dismal failure" in influencing Australian government policy^{xxxix}.

Essentially, the China threat narrative serves three purposes:

1. Supporting the federal government's political agenda by talking up foreign threats at a time of numerous domestic policy failures;
2. Attracting 'research' dollars, from the Australian government, US government and other foreign entities to drive this narrative; and
3. Supporting US foreign policy and strategic ambitions in the Asian region (ie: ensure that China can never rise to a point of economic and technological parity with the US).

In 2015, Robert Daly, the Director of the Wilson Center's Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, one of the US's leading China experts, made this bold assessment of the US/Australia narrative that China's ideology makes it a danger to global stability.

The former US diplomat said, "Even if they [China], just as a thought experiment, adapted our constitution and our laws wholesale, we should still try to limit their growth, merely because we [the United States] shouldn't have a peer competitor."

Daly, who favours constructive engagement with China, was making a counter-argument to this ideology during a televised debate. He advanced the proposition that the endgame of US foreign policy hawks was damaging China's economy at any costs, even if it meant pushing back hundreds of millions of ordinary people back into poverty.

The debate moderator, prominent US journalist and author, John Donvan responded "what's wrong with that?"

Essentially US foreign policy is to halt the rise of Australia's most important trading partner, it has crafted a narrative based on "democratic shared values" to launch a propaganda war. In Australia it is a Cold War run by individuals—such as politicians, academics, think tanks and journalists—who will not lose their jobs or suffer personal financial loss as a result of the destruction of Australia's most important trade relationship.

These individuals, and groups support, and seek alliances with other nations who have appalling human rights records and are not in any way functioning liberal democracies. It is an argument run by ideologues and they will partner with anyone who opposes China.

The last time the United States ventured into Asia to wage war on a communist regime, two million civilians were slaughtered and five decades later the communist leadership, of tiny Vietnam which the mighty Americans failed to topple, is still in place.

In August 2021, that same disastrous scenario played out in Afghanistan as the United States and its allies, including Australia, pulled out of the nation it invaded two decades earlier. As the Taliban overran the entire country, and the country's US-backed president, Ashraf Ghani, was whisked out of the country. The coalition forces left behind thousands of Afghans who'd aided them since 2001, Afghans facing certain death as retribution for helping American and Australians.

Democracy is a very easy concept to sell in the west, yet there is blissful ignorance of the fact that, in the entirety of human history no country has invaded other nations and killed more people in the name of "democracy and freedom" than the United States of America.

12.0 The fundamental lack of understanding of China and its history

China's rise, the legitimacy of the Communist Party in the eyes of the majority of Chinese people and their acceptance of a clear lack of freedom of public speech and associations is deeply rooted in its history.

By and large, senior US foreign policy makers have a deep understanding of China's culture and its recent history.

Australia's security hawks are mostly ignorant of China's recent history. By choice they want to have no understanding of the events leading up to the establishment of the People's Republic and why China's leaders are able to run the country with the overwhelming consent of their people.

China's promise to its people is not one of freedom but of prosperity and security—two things China was robbed of for a century prior to the establishment of the PRC.

And two things the Communist Party could not deliver for its first half century in power.

Now it can deliver those things to most—but not all—of its people. The Communist Party of China governs based along the lines of populism, it is widely supported by the Chinese people. Even

though the rapidly growing number of educated middle-class Chinese fully comprehend they are denied western-style freedoms of speech and association, they accept this as a trade-off.

There is also an often-ignored fact of the nature of nationalism and the domestic support for China's rise a military power.

China endured a century humiliation prior to the establishment of the People's Republic. British, Europeans and Americans exploited China, began wars and occupied territories.

Finally, China was occupied by Japan during World War Two—a conflict which the Chinese still refer to as *Japan's War of Aggression*.

There is no excuse for the atrocities visited upon the Chinese people in the Maoist-era and the decade-long Cultural Revolution^{xi}. However, the atrocities of the Japanese against the Chinese civilian population which began in Manchuria in 1931 and then continued throughout the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945 are far more egregious as they were committed as part of an Imperial Japanese campaign of systematic atrocities against civilian populations and prisoners of war right throughout Asia and the Pacific theatre of war.

This culminated in what became known as the *Rape of Nanking*^{xii}, also the *Massacre of Nanjing*, in which Japanese troops engaged in the mass rape of Chinese women and their subsequent murder, along with that of men and children of the civilian population of China's then capital Nanking (present-day Nanjing).

Over a six-week period from December 1937 to January 1938, some estimates^{xiii} but the number of Chinese women brutalized, raped and murdered by Japanese troops as high as 80,000.

At that rate, a Chinese woman was raped and murdered every 45 seconds for a continuous period of six weeks. In total 300,000 Chinese were murdered—7,000 people every day not by the actions of rouge Japanese soldiers but via the direct orders of Imperial Army General Iwane Matsui^{xiiii}, later tried and executed for his war crimes in 1948.

Japan's post-war acknowledgement of its atrocities has been shameful and often shameless in its denials. In 1994 then Japanese Justice Minister, Shigeto Nagato, publicly stated reports of the *Rape of Nanking* had been fabricated.^{xiv}

A Washington Post article chronicled the history of remorse expressed by subsequent Japanese governments as, *A (very) short history of Japan's war apologies*^{xv}

As the Post reported, "more recently Abe's government last year asked a United Nations special rapporteur to revise a 1996 report on wartime 'comfort women (she refused)." Throughout the war the Japanese had kidnapped some 200,000 Korean women forcing them to become sex-slaves for Japanese soldiers, calling them "comfort women".

This appeal to the UN^{xvi} is one of many examples of how a number of Japanese leaders have 'toned down' and, in some case flatly refused to accept, the war crimes of Imperial Japan in the 1930s and 1940s.

This has a material impact on the populations of China and South Korea. From a western perspective it comes in stark contrast to the genuine contrition of Germany over the atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime.

From an east Asian perspective—particularly in China—politicians, scholars and policy analysts, view the post-war position of western nations in relation to war crimes as hypocritical to the point of being offensive.

There was a clear expectation that Germany should unequivocally acknowledge, and make amends for its atrocities against fellow Europeans. However, western nations such as the US and Australia have rarely levelled any substantive criticism towards Japan over its failures to accept its national crimes against other Asians.

This is not to say that the Japanese civilian population did not suffer greatly under their own wartime imperial rulers. Nor did they not suffer enormously at the hands of the United States which dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There is bad blood, unresolved history and tension between China, Korea and Japan. However, these things are managed and do not get in the way of business and trade—the three nations understand each other’s positions on key issues, they know their respective cultures and they are pragmatic.

Japan and South Korea are also very close allies of the United States and host tens of thousands of US troops and US nuclear missiles pointed at China.

Australia has no history of “bad blood” with China yet in doing the bidding of US foreign and military policy, Australian exporters have been brought to their knees by retaliatory trade measures imposed upon them by China.

In some instances, like beef and barely, China has banned Australian exports as a direct result of the Morrison government’s parroting of US anti-China rhetoric, and China is now buying these commodities from the US.

13.0 The dangers of a US-backed populist narrative

A July 2021, a report from the Australia Institute^{xlvii} was published with began with the following words:

“In April this year, Australians were warned by no less an expert than the former Minister for Defence, Christopher Pyne, that they may need to engage in a ‘kinetic’ war with China in the next five to ten years.”

Pyne famously discussed his role as a defence industry consultant with EY whilst he was a sitting member of the Federal Cabinet, a matter which prompted a Senate investigation. He still works for EY, sits on the board of defence contractor XTEC and is Chair of the Advisory Board of another defence contractor NIOA.

The former Defence Minister has a vested financial interest in Australia’s increased military spending, yet he is quoted as an authoritative commentator on the ambitions of China.

The Australia Institute survey, *Should Australia go to war with China in defence of Taiwan?* reported 42 per cent of its six hundred respondents think China is poised to attack Australia.

The same number of respondents were polled in Taiwan and only a few more (49 per cent) expressed fears of an attack from the mainland. Bear in mind the Taiwanese are of the same Han ethnicity as the majority of Chinese, who moved over from the mainland in the 1680s; the PRC has

never given up its claim to what was once part of China; and the island sits just 161 kilometres off the coast of China.

That four in ten Australians should think Beijing—a mere 9,000 kilometres from Canberra—is gearing up for invasion is staggering.

Report author Allan Behm noted, “Given Australia and Taiwan’s historical and geographical differences, it is astounding that Australians could be more fearful than Taiwan in anticipating an attack from China.”

A reality check for the Canberra hawks is that 73 per cent of Australians regard the United States as an aggressive nation, while only six in ten Australians believe the US would come to our aid in the event of war with China.

Given Australia has followed the United States into 100 per cent of its wars, that Australians would only rate America a 60 per cent chance of leaping to our defence is a sobering statistic.

Totally at odds with Prime Minister Morrison and Foreign Minister Maris Payne’s unquestioned support of the US antagonism towards China, 75 per cent of Australians think it is in our interests that China and the US “work together towards world peace”. Of concern to the spin merchants inside the government an even higher number of coalition supporters, 79 per cent, think peace with China is a good idea.

Despite the US, and Morrison’s, rhetoric of Taiwan being a like-minded democracy of shared values, 76 per cent of Taiwanese rate America as an aggressor. Should the US come to Taiwan’s aid in a war with China, only 18 per cent of Taiwanese people think they would win.

A 2017 poll conducted in the US found that Republican voters^{xlviii} believed Australia to be the United States’ closest ally—closer than its direct neighbour Canada, ahead of Great Britain and its crucial NATO allies in Europe.

Australians aren’t quite as enthusiastic with Lowy Institute research finding that nearly four in ten Australians don’t believe the United States conducts itself responsibly on the world stage.^{xlix}

Unsurprisingly, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), almost immediately fired off its own report expressing its deep concern about the Lowy poll findings, under the headline: *Rebranding the Australia–US alliance for the next generation.*¹

The report’s author, Hayley Channer, put forward a string of ideas to address a decline in Australian public perceptions of its biggest ally. “How might this trend be reversed?”, she wrote. “Australia’s political leaders and officials need to adopt new ways of communicating the benefits of our US relationship to the public.”

The occasional waning of public support for the US alliance have never concerned Australia’s leaders, because absolute faith in that alliance is bipartisan.

Beyond that, there are think tanks and academic schools like ASPI, US Studies Centre, PerthUSAsia Centre, the National Security College and Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, supporting the arguments of both politicians and pro-US media/anti-China media outlets talking up the prospects of war.

14.0 The future of Australia's US alliance

Australia's connections with the United States—economically, politically, culturally and strategically—are completely intertwined.

The US is far and away the dominant military power in the Asia-Pacific region and it makes both strategic and political sense for Australia to be aligned with, rather than opposed to, that power.

It is worth noting that US military assets in South Korea and Japan are among its most important strategic deployments anywhere in the world. Thus, it would be very naïve on Australia's part to believe that these two north Asian alliances are not strategically far more important to the US than its partnership with Australia.

The United States takes its alliance with Australia for granted because it can, it requires no statecraft on the part of Washington to maintain relations with Australia.

Australia will, for the foreseeable future, remain a willing and compliant partner of the US. What is sorely needed in Australia is a shift towards policy decisions that are made on a case-by-case basis.

That may happen but it will not come from the major political parties and it will face significant resistance from vested interests in the defence and security establishments, supported by a number of academics and the mainstream media.

Just as the Cold War with the Soviet Union never became a 'hot war' it is not by any means certain that this Cold War 2.0 will result in armed conflict.

The US wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan were all narrowly defined conflicts against adversaries vastly overpowered by US forces—all of them ended disastrously for America, and even more disastrously for the millions of civilians killed in those US foreign excursions.

These were also nations whose political destruction and economic collapse was of no consequence to the US or the global economy. The Chinese economy is so interconnected with that of its present-day Cold War adversaries, its collapse would have dire global consequences.

The United States and China are major powers who can, and do, bully smaller countries. Picking fights on America's part is a stupid move by Australia, one that is already backfiring. Australia has no one to blame other than itself.

Vested interest, be it corporate, political or foreign, has always usurped national interest.

The best hope for Australia is not for any short or medium-term changes in foreign policy—that won't happen.

What is possible is that more and more people might question those policies, initiatives such as that IPAN Inquiry are a very important part of shifting the national conscience from one of accepting our global alliance to one of questioning them.

About the author

Marcus Reubenstein is a graduate in politics and economics from the University of New South Wales, where he majored in studies in Australian and US Politics and the Vietnam War. From 1992 until 1994 he worked as an adviser to a Federal Liberal member of parliament and was an officer bearer in the NSW Division of the Liberal Party of Australia. In 1993 he travelled to Washington as part of the US State Department International Visitor Leadership Program.

He began a career in journalism in 1996, mostly in television as a news producer with the Seven Network and Senior Correspondent at SBS World News Australia. He has travelled to more than 30 cities in mainland China on photography assignments and has held major exhibitions of his works.

In late-2019 he established China-focused independent news website APAC News and has been a regular contributor to public policy discussion website Pearls and Irritations. Reubenstein maintains a strict policy of independence and does not have any agreements, financial or otherwise, with any mainstream media outlets. He does share content with leading independent news website Michael West Media.

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