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A culture of insecurity

It's not too controversial to suggest that the global environment isn't in great shape, or even that it may never be so again. One might expect, therefore, that the leaders of the world's driest and frequently hottest continent would be at the forefront of efforts to minimise global warming. Yet neither our political class, nor many of the strategic elites that advise them, seem capable of recognising a real existential threat to the 'Australian way of life'—even life itself—when they see one.

This takes some explaining. To be sure, there are some well documented links between particular members of parliament, their electorates and vested interests who seek to shape the political debate. It was ever thus. But what is even more remarkable at the present historical juncture is that many of the security experts charged with keeping us safe seem to studiously ignore the conventional scientific wisdom and the evidence of their own eyes.

To be fair, some security agencies have recognised the threat posed by unmitigated climate change, but their response is generally all too predictable. Rather than thinking creatively about the root causes of climate change and how they might be addressed, they routinely fall back on the trusted tropes of security studies 101: when in doubt, buy more military hardware.

There is a well-known, self-fulfilling logic to all this. 'Security dilemmas' occur as a consequence of an absence of trust—and imagination—as neighbours prepare for traditional sorts of threats no matter how implausible they may be or how much they may have been undercut by the logic of economic interdependence. Strategic hardheads in Canberra are blithely talking about the need to be ready for a possible conflict with China, and the all too real potential this has to start World War 3.

Little wonder that there is an epidemic of anxiety and uncertainty among the young. Even before they contemplate the proverbial 'end of civilisation as we know it', they have had to deal with global warming, inter-generational injustice, economic inequality, not to mention the plague, of course.

Even in the unlikely event that the Coronavirus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, the general point about our collective impact on the natural environment seems painfully clear and uncontroversial: as the still expanding human population collides with what's left of nature in evermore destructive ways, such viruses will become increasingly common.

In my new book, *Environmental Anarchy? International Security in the 21st Century* (Bristol University Press 2021), I argue that the distinctive 'strategic cultures' of different countries help to explain why political and strategic elites continue to focus on 'traditional' security threats despite the fact that inter-state war is very rare these days.

Perhaps it's understandable that 'great powers', such as China and the United States, which both suffer from inflated ideas about their historical importance, might think contestation and competition with their peers is an obligation that they need to take seriously. Indeed, both countries have their own experts who endlessly make the case for strategic dominance and preparedness.

History is replete with examples of what happens when such rivalries, and the entirely pointless arms-races they encourage, spin out of control. But apologists might argue, it goes with the territory and neither the US or China can backdown without losing face, power and the ability to literally and metaphorically call the shots.

Yet, even if such rather self-serving arguments are taken seriously in Beijing and Washington, are they appropriate in Canberra? Hardly. Not only can Australia make no material difference to the outcome of any possible conflict between China and the US, but the cost of endlessly trying to

ingratiate itself with various American administrations is evident yet again in the strategic and humanitarian fiasco unfolding in Afghanistan.

Despite this, Australian strategic planners are pouring scarce resources into exotic and eye-wateringly expensive military assets, which will almost certainly never be used, and out of date by the time they are delivered. Even if they are used, it is likely to be in the context of a cataclysmic conflict with no possible winners.

With a different strategic outlook and mindset, however, it is not too fanciful to suggest that Australia really could play a constructive and instructive role as a creative middle power. Much of the money being currently lavished on weapons systems that are likely to be redundant before they're delivered, could be spent on restructuring the domestic economy along environmentally sustainable lines.

Ross Garnaut has provided a detailed roadmap for Australia to become the renewable energy superpower of Asia. Not only would this be good for us, but it might usefully demonstrate that other security priorities are not only possible but essential and beneficial in a variety of ways. Whether the current Australian government or any other administration, here or elsewhere, has the imagination to do so is a very different question and one that will in large part be determined by what goes on in the heads of strategic elites.