

## Defending Australia: The Deputy Sheriff Spending Spree

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*There are few sadder sights in international relations than a leadership in search of devils and hobgoblins. But such sights tend to make an appearance when specialists in threat inflation either get elected to office or bumped up the hierarchies of officialdom. The sagacious pondering types are edged out, leaving way for the drum beaters. As the Roman general Vegetius suggested with solemn gravity in the 4th century, "Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum," an expression that has come to mean that those desiring peace best ready for war.*

Australia's drum beating government has told its citizens rather pointedly that "we have moved into a new and less benign strategic era". It is something that the federal government has never tired of stressing ever since the White Tribe of Asia developed fears of genetic and maternal abandonment, being thousands of miles from Britannia but uncomfortably close to the hordes of Asia. To the north lay the colours black, brown and yellow, tempered, for a time, by the powers of Europe. Henry Lawson, who had a fear or two tucked under his belt, reflected on this sentiment in his patchy Flag of the Southern Cross: "See how the yellow-men next to her lust for her, Sooner or later to battle we must for her".

Such flag-wearing rhetoric can be found in the latest announcement by Prime Minister Scott Morrison to commit \$270 billion to the defence budget over the next ten years. In real terms, this amounts to an additional increase of \$70 billion from initial projections based on the 2016 Defence White Paper. His speech at the Australian Defence Force Academy gives the impression that Australia is thinking as an independent, autonomous agent, rather than a deputy sheriff for the Stars and Stripes. "The strategic competition between China and the United States means there's a lot of tension in the cord and a lot of risk of miscalculation."

Instead of committing to an easing of that tension, Morrison is keen to throw Australia into an increasingly crowded theatre of participants in the Indo-Pacific on the mistaken premise that things have dramatically changed. "And so we have to be prepared and ready to frame the world in which we live as best as we can, and be prepared to respond and play our role to protect Australia, defend Australia."

That defence is, invariably, linked to that of the United States, which sees Australia as an essential cog in the containment strategy of the PRC. The idea that this new round of spending will assist Australia's own independence from this project is misleading in the extreme. For one, the continuing stress on interoperability between the Australian Defence Force and its US counterparts remains a feature of spending decisions. Deputy Sheriffs know where and from whom to take their cues and stock from. Such weapons as the United States

Navy's AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) are on the list of future purchases. There is also the promise of underwater surveillance systems, and research and development in what promises to be another frontier of an international arms race: hypersonic weapons or, as US President Donald Trump prefers to call them "super duper missiles". (Some \$9.3 billion has been allocated for the latter.)

The prime minister also revisits a term that is impossible to quantify, largely because of its fictional quality. Deterrence, ever elastic and rubbery, only has meaning when the hypothetical opponent fears retaliation and loss. To undertake any attack would, to that end, be dangerous. For decades, this fictional deterrent was kept up by the vast umbrella of the US imperium.

The sense that this umbrella might be fraying is being used as an excuse to beat the war drum and stir the blood. Senator Jim Nolan is one, insisting that "we must share some of the blame [for the likelihood of regional conflict] because we have ignored our century-long history of national unpreparedness, and have relied blindly on an assumed level of US power which, since the end of the Cold War, exists at a much lower and dangerous level, and looks less likely to deter regional conflict." Nolan nurses a fantasy that seems to be catching: that Australia aspire to "self-reliance" and have "confidence that we could adjust in time required to defend ourselves and so, with a bit of luck, deter conflict impacting directly on us. At present, we are severely deficient."

Morrison similarly opines that, "The ADF now needs stronger deterrence capabilities. Capabilities that can hold potential adversaries' forces and critical infrastructure at risk from a distance, thereby deterring an attack on Australia and helping to prevent war". To imagine that Australia would be able to deter a power such as China, even with projected purchases, is daftly entertaining. The term simply does not come into play.

This incoherence is of little concern to the family of strategists that inhabit the isolated climes of Canberra. When money and weaponry is promised, champagne corks pop. Peter Jennings of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute is duly celebrating, given his fixation with that one power "with both the capacity and the desire to dominate the Indo-Pacific region in a way that works against Australia's interest". He even has a stab at humour: "We're not talking about Canada."

Broad policy commitments to bloated military expenditure are always to be seen with suspicion. They come with warnings with little substance, and only matter because people of like mind find themselves on opposite sides of the fence warning of the very same thing. If you do not spend now, you are leaving the country open to attack. That most important question "Why would they attack us in the first place?" is never asked. Even at the height of the furious battles of the Second World War, Imperial Japan debated the merits of invading an island continent which would have needlessly consumed resources. Australia, in short, has never been an inviting target for anyone.

The dangers of adding to the military industrial complex, then, are only too clear. Countries who prepare for war in the name of armed security can encourage the very thing they are meant to prevent. Purchased weapons are, after all, there to be used. The result is the expenditure of billions that would better be spent on health, education and, ever pressingly, on redressing environmental ruination.

We are then left with the desperate sense of a psychological defect: the need to feel wanted

and relevant on the big stage. This was very much the case when Prime Minister Robert Menzies committed Australian troops in 1965 to stem the Red-Yellow Horde in the steaming jungles of Vietnam. The language being used then was much as it is now: to deter, to advance national security, to combat an authoritarian menace in a dangerous region. Little weight was given to the subtleties of a nationalist conflict that was not driven by Beijing. Half-baked and uncooked strategy was served in the messes.

In adding their bloody complement to a local conflict that would eventually see a US defeat, Labor's Arthur Calwell, himself a self-styled white nationalist, made a sober speech in denunciation. Australia was committing resources to "the bottomless pit of jungle warfare, in a war in which we have not even defined our purpose honestly, or explained what we would accept as victory". Doing so was "the very height of folly and the very depths of despair." Australia now finds itself committed to a defence strategy against a mirage dressed in enemy's clothes masked in language that resists meaning or quantification.

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