

Morrison's indefensible Defence plan re-commits to Cold War with China

The Morrison government has decided that the midst of an economic crisis, which has already entailed the Commonwealth's largest binge on unproductive debt in living memory, is the perfect time to announce a raft of very expensive preparations for a war with the country that has kept our economy afloat for over a decade. However often Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Defence Minister Sen. Linda Reynolds and other officials mouth the mantra that the programs described in their 2020 Defence Strategic Update and Force Structure Plan are "not aimed at any one country", it is clear that they are targeted at China. Equally clear is that none of them stand any chance of fulfilling their stated purposes, be it "deterring" an imagined aggressive China (or anyone else) or reviving a sovereign Australian industrial capacity, the deliberate loss of which lies at the root of our present economic woes. What they *will* do is further cement Canberra into its place as a loyal lackey of the dying Anglo-American Empire; enrich foreign-owned armaments manufacturers at the Australian public's expense; and needlessly exacerbate the geopolitical tensions Morrison et al. purport to be protecting us against.

In his speech launching the two papers, given 1 July at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) near Canberra, Morrison declared it a "simple truth" that "we need to ... prepare for a post-COVID world that is poorer, that is more dangerous, and that is more disorderly." "We have not seen the conflation [*sic*] of global, economic and strategic uncertainty now being experienced here in Australia in our region since the existential threat we faced when



The PM announces his new defence plan. Photo: pm.gov.au

the global and regional order collapsed in the 1930s and 1940s", he said, implicitly likening China to Nazi Germany and/or Imperial Japan. Without saying so straight out, Morrison made clear that China's sin is to have dared to strive for technological parity with the United States and its hangers-on. "Regional military modernisation is occurring at an unprecedented rate", he complained. "Capabilities and reach are expanding. Previous assumptions of [our] enduring advantage and technological edge are no longer constants and cannot be relied upon." After invoking the usual litany of complaints and allegations against China— territorial claims, unspecified "coercive activities", "disinformation and foreign interference", and pushback against the so-called "rules and norms" that Anglosphere leaders always cite in place of the international law they themselves break at will—Morrison left no doubt as to where his government stands in any US-China dispute. Our "ever-closer alliance with the United States", he declared, "is the *foundation of our defence policy*. The security assurances and intelligence-sharing and technological industrial cooperation we enjoy with the United States are, and will remain, critical to our national security. ... But if we are to be a *better and more effective ally*, we must be prepared to invest in our own security." (Emphasis added.) Moreover, Australia must "remain prepared to make military contributions outside of our immediate region, where it is in our national interests to do so ... including in support of US-led coalitions". Of course, if one accepts that the US alliance is indeed critical to our national security, then supporting "US-led coalitions" becomes a national interest by default.

The Strategic Update itself states that "Australia's immediate region is also *the area in which we should be most capable of military cooperation with the United States* ... which continues to underwrite the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific" (emphasis added), and that "Only the nuclear and conventional capabilities of the United States can offer effective deterrence against the possibility of nuclear threats against Australia." (Never mind that as the late former PM Malcolm Fraser noted in his 2014 book *Dangerous Allies*, the only reason Australia might be targeted by nuclear weapons is that we host US bases involved in targeting nukes at other countries.) None of which is a surprise given the new papers merely update the government's 2016 Defence White Paper, which explicitly subordinates Australia's defence policy to that of the United States; pledges open-ended and unconditional support to the US "strategic rebalance" to Asia, including ever-greater "interoperability" with US armed forces; and portrays China as the single greatest threat (with Russia a close second) to the "rulesbased global order" we are duty-bound to protect.¹

Cash splash

Much of the funding projected in the Update is not new either. Headlines proclaimed that Morrison had announced a "\$270 billion defence spending plan", implying that it was all new spending; but the figure is misleading. First, the overall projected Defence budget is much larger, at some \$575 billion over the next decade. This total, the Strategic Update explains, "includes around \$270 billion in capability investment, compared to \$195 billion in capability investment for the decade to 2025-26 when the 2016 Defence White Paper was released", meaning over 60 per cent of it was already slated to be spent. In Defence's jargon "capability" broadly means the plant, equipment and infrastructure

that enable it to “achieve a desired effect” in any of its five specific operational domains—land, air, maritime, space, and information and cyberspace—and includes the already planned acquisition and “sustainment” costs of the Navy’s *Hunter*-class frigates and *Attack*-class future submarines (whose cost the government hilariously claims “remains \$50 billion in 2016 constant dollars”, and has only blown out to a current \$89.7 billion because of “inflation and projected foreign exchange variations” that are apparently several times those of experienced by the rest of the economy). It also includes the Air Force’s even more hideously expensive F-35A Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters built by US aerospace giant Lockheed Martin, which is set to be the beneficiary of one of the larger new expenditures as well: According to a 30 June [ABC News report](#), the Government confirmed it would purchase an unspecified number of the company’s AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), via the US Navy, “at a cost of \$800 million”. Independent investigative journalist Marcus Reubenstein [reported 1 July](#) for APAC News that the government’s choice of missile appears to have been directly influenced by the lobbying of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Canberra’s premier warmongering think tank, which just so happens to be funded in part by lavish donations from Lockheed Martin and other members of the US-dominated military-industrial complex, as well as by commissions from the Australian and allied governments to produce studies justifying their warlike policies.

Joseph Camilleri, emeritus professor of international relations at Melbourne’s La Trobe University, reported in a [6 July column](#) for politics blog Pearls and Irritations that just the projections in the 2016 White Paper would have doubled Defence’s budget in real terms over the 20 years from 2005 to 2025. And now, he wrote, “Morrison has announced a further investment of \$70 billion over the next six years. The aim is to acquire more lethal capabilities, including sophisticated maritime long-range missiles, air-launched strike and anti-ship weapons, as well as additional land-based weapons and offensive cyber capabilities. What is the justification for this vastly expanding military arsenal? In Scott Morrison’s words, we are responding to ‘a new dynamic of strategic competition’.... The Prime Minister did not go on to explain how Australia’s increasingly provocative defence posture will ease regional tensions, slow down the regional arms build-up, or defuse the strategic competition.”

In a follow-up [column](#) the next day, Prof. Camilleri charged that “The planned growth of ADF capabilities is locking Australia more and more firmly into America’s military-industrial complex. This is the inevitable result of our current military procurement plans, strategic doctrine, training practices, combined operations and active support for US military bases and communications and surveillance systems. ... [And] we do this knowing that these facilities support US nuclear-war targeting, US extra-judicial counter-terrorism killings, US plans for space warfare, not to mention US operations in highly volatile conflict zones, notably Afghanistan, Iraq, the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea. “How to explain the strange reasoning behind these choices? Part of the answer is that our political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence elites remain addicted to the military power associated with imperial centres. They see themselves as having privileged access to an exclusive and powerful club—once the British club, now the American club. They may have grasped the demise of the former but find it difficult to accept the slow but steady decline of the latter.”

‘Sovereign capability’ furphy

Given the economic shortcomings exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic—to wit, that almost the only thing Australia is able to manufacture these days is an artificial fear of China—the second key selling point of Morrison’s Strategic Update is its supposed contribution towards restoring a sovereign industrial capability. This too is a lie. Citing the 2018 Defence Industry Capability Plan (DICP), the government states that it “*supports Australian industry involvement in Defence procurement and projects ... requires that prime companies [all of them foreign-controlled multinationals] competing for Defence contracts demonstrate how they will maximise Australian industry involvement ... is committed to maximising opportunities for Australian industry ... [and] will use contractual and non-contractual means to ensure that prime contractors meet the Government’s expectation that they maximise Australian industry involvement*” (emphasis added), and so on. The use of non-committal language is deliberate, however—because no enforcement mechanisms exist. As the *Australian Alert Service* reported at the time, the 2018 DICP promised to spend over \$200 billion in a decade to establish a “strong, sovereign naval shipbuilding and broader defence industry to manage strategic risk, defend our nation and grow our economy”.² But sovereign industrial capacity was defined as “the ability to maintain, employ, sustain and upgrade our defence capabilities with the maximum level of Australian access to, or control over, the essential skills, technology, intellectual property, financial resources and infrastructure”; and “Australian defence industry” as “businesses with an Australian Business Number and Australian-based [note, not ‘-owned’] industrial capability ... in a supply chain that leads to the [ADF] or an international defence force.” (Emphasis added.) A mandatory quotient of Australian industry involvement in major projects was explicitly ruled out. Two years later, the results are in: the *Australian* reported 30 June that British “prime” BAE Systems had “excluded local firms from bidding to supply key equipment” on the \$35 billion *Hunter*-class frigate program, and had invited only its British suppliers to tender for work on the first batch of three ships despite a contractual obligation to ensure 54 per cent of its contracts go to Australian companies. Defence sided with BAE, claiming that “the use of [its] UK supply chain for ‘major platform systems and subsystems’ had been necessary to ensure steel was cut for the first ship by the end of 2022”. And according to the 9 June *Australian*, French shipbuilder Naval Group, the prime contractor on the submarine project, had forced Adelaide company PMB Defence (which has made batteries for the

Collins-class subs for 30 years) into a “competitive run-off” with a preferred supplier in Greece, and that “The subs’ other ‘critical systems’—its [sic] main motor, diesel generators, electrical switchboard and weapons-handling system—were handed to overseas companies without competitive tenders.” Meanwhile, as veteran reporter Brian Toohey reported 25 May in the *Sydney Morning Herald*,³ the obsession with “interoperability” has left the ADF entirely dependent on the USA, which “denies Australia access to the computer source code essential to operate key electronic components in its ships, planes, missiles, sensors and so on.”

As the AAS recently reported, Australia’s own history furnishes the best model for the development of a truly sovereign industrial base, in the form of the inter-war period’s Munitions Supply Board.⁴ In contrast to today’s wasteful system of dedicated military-industrial corporations sustained only by war or the threat thereof, under the leadership of English-born engineering genius Arthur E. Leighton the MSB developed precision manufacturing techniques which it then disseminated throughout the economy, so that every factory and workshop in the nation could produce war materiel at need, and high-quality civilian goods otherwise. Only Canberra’s ideological blindness and infatuation with Empire prevents the re-institution of that system today.

1. “‘Black-is-White’ Paper singles out Russia, China as threats to ‘global order’”, AAS, 30 Mar. 2016.
2. “‘Sovereign’ defence industry plan entrenches Australia’s colonial status”, AAS, 16 May 2018.
3. “What ‘sovereignty’? A foreign power controls our defence force”, AAS, 3 June 2020.
4. “Lessons of the Munitions Supply Board (1921-39)”, AAS, 13 May 2020.

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