

Elder statesmen lash Dutton and Pezzullo's war talk

4 May—Senior figures in the Australian government have begun openly promoting the idea that Australia will soon be embroiled in a US-led war with China. The Canberra national security establishment would have it that this is because China has taken an “authoritarian turn” in recent years, and is now aggressively threatening international law and order. If anything, the reverse is true. Whilst none of China’s policies has fundamentally changed, Australia certainly has become more authoritarian, having enacted laws under the pretext of “protecting national security” to squash press freedom and persecute whistleblowers, give arbitrary detention and surveillance powers to intelligence agencies and police, and more. Now the same two men who have fronted Australia’s transition to a police state in their capacities as Minister and Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, Peter Dutton and Michael Pezzullo, are beating the drums for war with China. The public backlash against their blatant jingoism and Cold war paranoia, however, including from influential elders of both major political parties, suggests that Australia’s political establishment is not united on the issue.



Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo, who worked under Peter Dutton to expand Australia’s state security apparatus, is joining Dutton in fanning the flames of war with China. Photo: Screenshot

Whilst Australia officially designated China a threat to the “rules-based global order” in 2016, ¹ as late as 2019 even Prime Minister Scott Morrison continued publicly to [characterise China](#) as an essential trading partner first and foremost. All that changed in 2020, however, when then-US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo began accusing China of electoral interference, and of deliberately spreading COVID-19 to wreck the US and global economy. After Morrison jumped on Trump’s bandwagon, Beijing began taking a harder line on longstanding trade disputes with Australia, and responding pointedly to Australian officials’ insinuations of “foreign interference” and accusations of human rights abuses—moves which the Australian media have falsely portrayed as Chinese “aggression”. On 25 April Dutton, now defence minister after a Cabinet reshuffle in March, took things a step further by using the occasion of ANZAC Day—originally a day of solemn reflection, but which recent governments have turned into a disgraceful celebration of war—to canvas participation in a war with China over Taiwan. The possibility “should not be discounted”, Dutton told ABC’s Insiders program that morning, adding that Australians “need to be realistic” about Beijing’s “militarisation” and its intention to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. Whilst hedging that “nobody wants to see conflict”, Dutton said that in the event Beijing were to pursue reunification by force, Australia would “continue to work with ... our allies” to resolve the situation. Our only “ally” with a declared (if illegitimate) interest in the issue is the USA, whose only means to try to thwart Beijing would be military intervention.

Pezzullo’s ‘warrior’ paean panned

Pezzullo meanwhile sent out an ANZAC Day message to Home Affairs staff, which the *Australian* published two days later under the headline “The drums of war are growing louder”, in which he waxed lyrical about the circumstances in which we might send our “warriors” abroad once more. Noting the upcoming 70th anniversary of the 1951 Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty, which he incorrectly called a “military alliance” (in fact it prescribes only “consultation” on collective security, and includes no mutual defence obligations), Pezzullo wrote that “our national defence strategy has at its heart the protection afforded to Australia in the most perilous circumstances by the military might of the USA ... and its willingness and preparedness to wage war against a major-power adversary.” To emphasise the *quid pro quo* nature of the arrangement, Pezzullo cited a 1953 speech by US President and retired General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who he said had “rallied ... the country’s allies to the danger posed by the amassing of Soviet military power ... [and] instilled in the free nations the conviction that as long as there persisted tyranny’s threat to freedom they must remain armed, strong and ready for war.... Today, free nations continue to face this sorrowful challenge.”

The backlash was both swift and scathing, including from some unexpected quarters. Former Australian Army infantry officer Rodger Shanahan, now a research fellow at the influential and not at

all China-friendly Lowy Institute think tank, ridiculed Pezzullo in the 29 April *Australian*. “‘Warrior’ is one of those meaningless identity terms beloved of certain groups that use it to connote aggression and a willingness to stand up for a cause”, Shanahan wrote. The Australian military “has not normally been described in this way. Perhaps it was because military service was seen as exactly that—service to the country. ... But more recently there has been some effort made to craft an identity onto the role of servicemen and women that is at odds with what that service is about.” The dangers inherent in fostering such a “warrior culture” having been made evident by the recent Brereton Report into war crimes by Australian special forces in Afghanistan, “It is time to expunge the term warrior from the lexicon of politicians and public servants”, Shanahan wrote.

Former Labor Foreign Minister (2012-13) Bob Carr, writing 1 May in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, called out the foreign influence at play. “Canberra gives the impression it wants to turn day-to-day management of a bilateral relationship into an existential crusade, urged on by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a think tank partially funded by the US [government], from which commentary on China has become more and more blood-curdling”, Carr wrote. “When hardliners like those in ASPI say we are on the eve of a war over Taiwan, they won’t concede participation is still a choice for Australia”, despite the fact that the Liberal government of PM John Howard, the USA’s self-described “deputy sheriff” who created ASPI in the first place, flatly refused when tensions last flared in 2004. And in the 29 April *Canberra Times*, former Liberal Party leader John Hewson, now a professor at the Australian National University, demanded: “Where is our national interest in a Taiwanese conflict? ... isn’t this more an internal issue for the Chinese?”

Hewson is right. Every nation on Earth, including the USA and Australia, recognises Taiwan as part of China, as does the government of Taiwan itself—and ludicrously claims still to be the rightful government of all China, 72 years after its founders lost the civil war. Neither Australia nor the USA has any legitimate stake in its status, let alone one worth risking a nuclear war over.

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 5 May 2021

Footnotes

[1.](#) “‘Black-is-White’ Paper singles out Russia, China as threats to ‘global order’”, AAS, 30 Mar. 2016.

Further reading:

[Recall the nuclear war warnings of 2012](#)