

A clear and present danger: Peter Dutton and the ‘Strategy of Denial’

By John Lander

On 23 November 2021, Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong said that the Morrison Government’s constant “amping up the prospect of war against a superpower is the most dangerous election tactic in Australian history”. She is right that it is extremely dangerous, but the ploy has been used before. The difference this time is, of course, that China is a nuclear superpower.

The fiction of the ‘China threat’

In the 1960s the Coalition government terrified the Australian public with the prospect of the “Yellow Peril” of Chinese communism toppling all the “dominoes” in South East Asia and wiping out Australia’s democratic way of life, unless it was halted in its tracks in Vietnam. So we joined the USA in its “war of aggression” in Vietnam (Daniel Ellsberg, 2002).

Following the destruction of cities and rural environment by more bombs than were dropped by all sides in WWII, with the attendant slaughter of 3.8 million people (Robert McNamara, 1999) and the maiming and deforming of countless more by Napalm and Agent Orange, we were finally defeated in 1975.

Unsurprisingly the “Yellow Peril” did not come flooding down to Australia, because the Vietnamese national liberation movement which won the war, was as opposed to Chinese intervention as it was to American intervention. It is delusional to believe that Vietnam would support an American war against China.

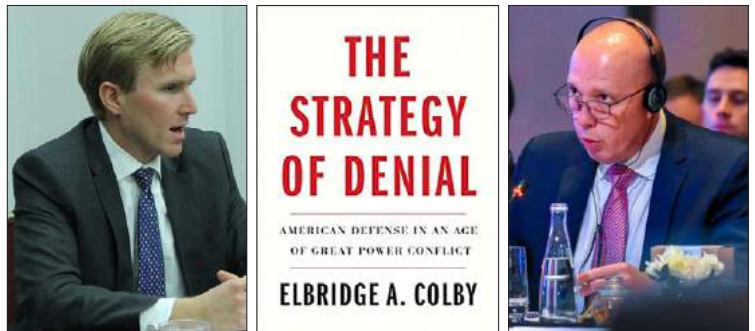
Is Dutton out of step with US strategy?

Penny Wong said that Peter Dutton was “wildly out of step with a strategy long adopted by Australia and our principal ally” which was the “bipartisan adoption of a One China Policy and advocacy to deter unilateral changes to the status quo”.

But is he really out of step with US strategy? On the contrary, he appears to be implementing the “Strategy of Denial” detailed in the book of that name by Elbridge Colby, a book he keenly read. (Troy Bramston in *The Australian*, 15 December 2021).

Colby served as the lead official in the development of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS). He served with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq in 2003 and the 2004-05 President’s Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, making him adept in campaigns of vilification through misinformation. He is committed to the pursuit of the “Wolfowitz doctrine” of maintaining US primacy in the world by military force. He believes a “limited war” between China and Taiwan would serve the US objective of inhibiting China’s rise.

The 2018 NDS has not been significantly revised under President Biden. In it Colby recommended that US allies Japan, India and Australia should be drawn into a coalition (like the “Coalition of the Willing” against Iraq) to contain China. Two years later, under Biden, the QUAD and AUKUS were formed.



US strategist Elbridge Colby (left) appears to have influenced Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton (right), who keenly read Colby’s book. Photos: Flickr, Wikimedia

Step 1: Vilification

In line with Colby’s strategy of demonisation, Dutton is generating fear of China by characterising its efforts to protect its national territorial integrity in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan as “aggressive expansionism”. These are specious examples, since all four provinces have been part of the sovereign territory of China since well before Australia existed as a nation state. He seems unaware that China has never invaded another country for territorial gain, whereas the USA has attempted the overthrow of 60 countries since WWII, succeeding in the case of 25 elected democracies.

Dutton said he had to speak the truth about China’s military build-up, but failed to mention the US “pivot to Asia”, which ranged 60 per cent of American naval capability along the coast of China. To the Chinese, this must have looked like a potential blockade of its most economically vital ports, and provoked the acceleration of military counter measures.

He cited China’s construction of military bases in the South China Sea as a further sign of “expansionism”, but failed to mention that Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and even Taiwan had similar bases.

He did not acknowledge the possibility that China saw its bases as a counter to the constant incursions by the USA and its allies (especially Australia) into waters vital to its interests, through “freedom of navigation operations”. He made no mention of the fact that China has one base outside its own periphery, compared to over 800 US bases around the world, many of them encircling China.

To further stoke public fear, he pointed out that China’s navy was many times the tonnage of Australia’s and their missiles were capable of striking any target in Australia as far south as Hobart. He characterised China’s military build-up as a threat to Australia and its region.

China’s defence budget is less than one third of America’s, which this year is \$777 billion—60 per cent of the national budget, funded by a \$27 trillion national debt—and largely devoted to projecting American power into the Indo-Pacific to derail China.

Step 2: Goad China to act

Colby argued that, after a campaign to vilify China, it could be goaded into starting a military conflict over

Taiwan, and thus be portrayed as the aggressor.

The USA has already taken a number of steps in this direction—apart from stationing the bulk its naval power off the coast of China. These include:

- “freedom of navigation” and combat exercises in the South China Sea and Taiwan Straits;
- visits by senior US officials using US military aircraft;
- creation of a putative Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) extending well over mainland territory and then alleging Chinese violation of it;
- secretly providing military training personnel (whilst denying it);
- including Taiwan in the Summit for Democracy (9-10 December 2021), implying it is a separate country.

Dutton is further goading China by reassuring Taiwan that Australia would “inevitably” come to its defence in the event of a military move against it from the mainland. He is increasing the possibility that Taiwan will feel emboldened to declare independence from China and thus upset the status quo and provoke the war that Colby recommends.

Taiwan as proxy

Daniel L. Davies, a retired Lieutenant Colonel and senior fellow for Defense Priorities, has argued that “refusing to be drawn into a no-win war with China over Taiwan will see our comparative advantage over China increase dramatically. Their military would be seriously degraded... while ours... would be at full strength”.

The *Taiwan Relations Act 1979* imposes a legal requirement on the USA to “provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character”. There is no treaty obligation for the USA to intervene to defend Taiwan. According to Davies, the USA should not risk any of its own military assets, but should push Taiwan to invest more in its self-defence capabilities. Colby has suggested that the USA should not provide air defence to Taiwan, since widespread civilian casualties would whip up world anger against China.

Under the strategies proposed by Colby and Davies, China would become bogged down in a long-drawn-out conflict that would severely deplete its armed forces and deflect its resources away from economic development and international infrastructure cooperation. It would also satisfy the insatiable appetite of the US military-industrial complex for never-ending arms sales.

A similar fate for Australia

The ANZUS Treaty is a non-binding collective security agreement. It provides only that an armed attack on one of its members would constitute a danger to the others and require consultations on measures to meet the threat. It does not bind the USA to intervene to protect Australia should Australia attack a third party.

In the light of the Colby/Davies strategy for Taiwan, the USA would be unlikely to risk its own military assets or any of its homeland territory in direct defence of Australia. It would increase arms sales to bolster Australia’s self-defence, at great cost to the Australian budget and great profit to the military-industrial complex.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, promised that America would not leave Australia “alone in the field” in its trade dispute with China. Instead of taking supportive action, however, the USA leapt in to snatch up the markets lost by Australia’s “standing up to China”. This does not encourage confidence that the USA would actively intervene in support of Australia in a military clash with China.

Commitment under AUKUS to heavy expenditure on

nuclear-powered submarines, to arrive in the next 20 years or so, offers little reassurance if Dutton’s ‘war with China’ erupts in the next five years.

Dutton has disingenuously asserted that the ASEAN countries would support Australia. He has failed to acknowledge that such support is far from certain, since ASEAN on 22 November 2021 renewed its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China. Each of its members has ongoing infrastructure projects under China’s BRI, which they would not wish to put at risk. They have all expressed varying degrees of disquiet at ‘increased power projection’ into the region through AUKUS.

The effectiveness of the QUAD in defence of Australia is also highly questionable, given that India has security obligations with China through its commitment to the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. India is also dependent for its armament on Russia, which has a “better than treaty relationship” with China. Russia seems unlikely to equip India to fight China.

Conclusion

The Colby strategy has not been formally adopted by the Biden administration, but there are signs that it is gaining increasing traction in policy-making circles in Washington. There are also strong voices in Washington in favour of direct US military involvement in defence of Taiwan, arguing that if it failed to do so, the USA would lose international credibility as the “protector of democracy”.

Fortunately, President Biden has opted, for the time being, for continuation of the policy of “strategic ambiguity” (if somewhat weighted towards reassurances to Taiwan), eschewing the two competing, more aggressive scenarios.

In either scenario, the result for Australia would be the same: If Australia were to join in the battle to “save democratic Taiwan”, as proposed by Dutton, then, judging from his own assessment of China’s capabilities, the Australian navy would be obliterated in short order and command/control centres in Australia destroyed (especially Pine Gap, in the unlikely event that US forces were involved).

The strident anti-China policy of the Morrison government has positioned Australia as the enemy of China, which is increasingly reluctant to trade with the enemy. Hence the China trade would not be available to buffer Australia from the worst effects of the next global financial crisis (which many economic analysts believe is imminent), as it did in the 2008 GFC. Australia would be considerably weakened economically and much less able to sustain a military engagement with China.

Dutton’s pronouncements, however, are edging Australia inexorably towards outright warfare with China.

Australia needs instead to align itself more clearly to Biden’s public posture by unambiguously reaffirming (to both China and Taiwan) its adherence to the One China principle and its commitment to a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the “Taiwan problem”.

First published in Pearls and Irritations, 13 January 2022. The author worked in the China section of the Department of Foreign Affairs in the lead-up to the recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1972 and several other occasions in the 1970s and 1980s. He was deputy ambassador in Beijing 1974-76 (including a couple of stints as Chargé d’Affaires). He was heavily involved in negotiation of many aspects in the early development of Australia-China relations, especially student/teacher exchange, air traffic agreement and consular relations. He has made numerous visits to China in the years 2000-2019.