

# Australian foreign policy strategists discuss US-China nuclear war

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A public discussion in Melbourne last Thursday provided a chilling insight into the calculations of a layer within the Australian foreign policy and military establishment that now anticipates that US-China strategic rivalry is likely to trigger a war between the nuclear-armed powers.

The panel discussion was organised by La Trobe University and titled “How to respond to China’s rise?” The main speakers were Hugh White and Linda Jakobsen.

Jakobsen is formerly of the Lowy Institute and currently a visiting professor at the University of Sydney’s United States Studies Centre, which was created in 2006 to promote the US-Australian alliance and Australian involvement in US-led wars of aggression.

White has a long record within the military-intelligence apparatus, having been an advisor to former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke, a senior official in the defence department and an intelligence analyst with the top-level Office of National Assessments. More recently he has worked with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Australian National University.

White opened the meeting by repeating the criticisms he has previously levelled at Washington’s “pivot” to Asia, which has seen an aggressive attempt to militarily and diplomatically isolate China as a means of maintaining US imperialism’s domination of the entire Asia-Pacific region.

In 2012, White wrote *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, opposing the Australian government’s participation in the Obama administration’s reckless confrontation of Beijing. He remains the most prominent critic of the “pivot” from within the Australian foreign policy establishment. His

remarks on Thursday, however, underscore the fact that this minority position within the ruling class is no less militarist and pro-war than the dominant rival camp, which backs an unwavering commitment to the US strategic alliance and Washington’s confrontation of China.

The public event was billed as a debate between White and Jakobsen, with the latter defending current US and Australian government policies. Yet far more united the two speakers than divided them.

Speaking of the pivot and the associated geostrategic calculation that the Chinese government will accept subordination to US imperialism, White declared: “Let’s be absolutely clear—I really hope this policy works... I love US primacy. It’s been terrifically good for Australia. I love the rules-based order in Asia which it has supported. It has given us the forty best years in Asia’s long history. And if it could last forever, no-one would be happier than me.”

Having whitewashed Washington’s bloody record in the region—including waging brutal wars of aggression in Korea and Vietnam, and backing countless right-wing dictatorships—White expressed regret that the situation had irrevocably changed. “Wishes don’t make policy,” he concluded.

White reviewed both China’s economic expansion and the decline of US global power. He pointed to a series of US strategic initiatives in the past 15 years—including Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, “keeping the Russians in a box,” and “containing China”—that “all failed.” Given this, he stated, there was no legitimate grounds to expect Beijing to “back down” in the face of US threats and provocations.

He continued: “I take seriously the risk of war. A lot of people find that odd—because they think, how could this possibly come to war, how could that be in

anyone's interest? Well it wouldn't be, just for the record, but that doesn't mean it won't happen. Anyone who is very confident that escalating rivalry between the US and China, over who is the leader of the Asian order, will not result in war must be very confident that one of them will back off. And the question is: who are you expecting to back off? If neither of them does, then that's how wars start. That's what happened in 1914."

After having raised the spectre of another world war, White gave short shrift to Jakobsen's assurances that the US-China relationship was highly "stable and mature."

He told the meeting: "There's surprisingly little serious strategic communication [between the US and China]. Very important people can meet in very expensive rooms and drink very glamorous mineral water, and still say nothing to one another of substance. And I see very little evidence that the United States and China have had a serious discussion about their nuclear relationship."

White repeatedly warned of the danger of a nuclear war between the two powers.

"The scary thing is that the mutual expectation [of Washington and Beijing] that the other will back down will carry up through an escalating conventional conflict to the nuclear threshold," he stated. "One of the reasons why that's a real danger is that nobody knows what the nuclear threshold is. This is one of the big differences between the situation in Asia today and the situation in Europe during the Cold War. Everybody [then] knew what the threshold was. It was very clear what it was you had to do—if you started up your T-72 [tank] and drove it through Checkpoint Charlie, you were going to start a nuclear war. It was geographically defined by a line down the middle of Europe, to the nearest metre.

"But nobody knows what the equivalent line in East Asia is today. And I think there is a risk that both sides in a conflict, as it starts to escalate, as it easily would, will find themselves worrying about what the other guy would do, and start to think, well maybe I have to move first..."

These remarks point to the urgent need for the working class to intervene against the rapidly escalating danger that US imperialism and its allies, including the Australian government, will trigger a third world war that would see incalculable devastation around the

world.

White inadvertently pointed to the ruling elite's conspiracy of silence on the war danger. "Australian political leaders are much more conscious of the seriousness of the strategic rivalry between the US and China than they have ever expressed publicly," he explained. "Our political leaders don't speak in private as they do in public. They don't really assume that the United States and China are just getting on fine. They know this is a really serious power political rivalry, the outcome of which is far from clear."

Confronted with the spectre of a nuclear holocaust, White's proposed response is as reactionary as it is utopian. He advocates a vast expansion of military spending—with the additional resources inevitably paid for by the working class—to allow a more "independent" Australian imperialism to somehow pressure Washington to cede geostrategic dominance in East Asia to China.

The only realistic perspective, however, is for the working class of Australia to unite with their class brothers and sisters in the US, China, and internationally in a joint political struggle based on the perspective of socialist internationalism against war and against the capitalist system that gives rise to war.



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