Australian government moving on from war crimes in Afghanistan to prepare war against China

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Just weeks after being installed as the Liberal-National Coalition's defence minister, Peter Dutton declared yesterday that his top priority is to assure all military personnel that the government "has their back" after an official report documenting Australian war crimes in Afghanistan had dented troop "morale."

Dutton's comments were the most explicit statement yet from a government minister detailing the relationship between the official attempts to bury the Afghan revelations, and the preparations for even greater crimes, centreing on Australia's frontline role in escalating US-led plans for conflict with China.

Last November, the official Brereton inquiry, which had dragged on in secret for four years, revealed "credible evidence" that Australian troops murdered at least 39 Afghans and committed other atrocities, including torture, between 2009 and 2013.

As a continuation of a years-long cover-up, the Brereton report absolved military command and governments of any responsibility and concealed more than it revealed. A brief period of hand wringing from the political and media establishment ensued, focused on the damage done to the military's reputation. The issue was then largely dropped.

Late last month, Chris Moraitis, director-general of the Office of the Special Investigator, established at the recommendation of the Brereton report to oversee criminal inquiries into the allegations, revealed that his organisation had done virtually nothing. It had not even hired investigators.

Dutton's comments yesterday, in a featured interview with the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, demonstrated the political calculations behind the glacial progress of the investigation. The office would continue to examine "whether criminal charges could be brought" against any of the soldiers, and the issue, according to Dutton, was "properly left to that process." The framing, as though there is any doubt that chargeable conduct occurred, is nothing short of obscene. One of the murders, involving a special forces soldier shooting a prone and unarmed Afghan at point blank range, was captured on film and has been seen by millions of people.

The government, meanwhile, would not be rushed into implementing the other cosmetic recommendations of the Brereton inquiry.

Dutton spoke as though the revelations were of the distant past. Despite the fact that literally nobody has yet been held accountable for the violations of international law, it was time to move on. "I think morale has been down and I think there is good reason now for it to be rebuilt," Dutton said. "And the commitment that the government has got to the Australian Defence Force, not only financially but morally, is very important.

"My message is we are getting back to business," the defence minister proclaimed. "That business is more important than ever, and that business is to keep Australia safe and secure."

The real business is to intensify the preparations for war with China, as the newly-installed Biden administration deepens a confrontation with Beijing initiated under Obama and continued by Trump.

In his interview, Dutton declared that he had instructed his department "to provide all available support to the troops and get major procurement programs back on track." This was necessary because Australia faced a "very uncertain time in the future" as a result of purported Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

In a half-hearted attempt at concealing the imminent dangers posed by the US-Australian military build-up, Dutton reassured readers that "Nobody believes we are on the brink of war or anything like that." In the next breath, however, he stated that Australia was already in a war, being fought on the cyber arena. Such "grey-zone" conflict would become the norm.

Dutton proceeded to provide a list of measures undeniably directed towards violent confrontation with Beijing, from the deepening of the US-Australia alliance, to the consolidation of the Quad, a partnership of America, Australia, India and Japan, the region's largest militaries, and the rapid expansion of arms capabilities.

The government had to ensure that its $270 billion spend on military hardware over this decade proceeded on time, meaning that Dutton would focus on the crisis-ridden programs to build 12 Attack Class submarines and nine Hunter-class frigates. In

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his first announcement as defence minister, less than a week after his appointment, Dutton unveiled plans to build missiles in Australia for the first time since the 1960s.

The minister's pronouncements in the *Australian* coincided with a tour of the Lavarack Barracks in the northern Queensland city of Townsville. Dutton and Phillip Thompson, the area's federal MP and himself a military veteran, were provided with a "'capability display' involving infantry, tanks, armoured personnel carriers and Bushmaster vehicles," according to the *Australian*.

The *Townsville Bulletin* reported that Dutton and Thompson met with the "3rd Brigade on Thursday night to pick their brains about what the troops on the ground need, what equipment works, and what needs to change."

Thompson's description of the visit had an unmistakably militarist and authoritarian character. "It was just the Diggers and the Minister," he said. "We can have meetings with high-ranking officers whenever we want but we want to listen to the Diggers, we want to find out if we can help them do their job better and easier."

Aside from anything else, the clear subtext of the visit was that Dutton is a "soldier's man," and they need not worry about future ramifications, including prosecutions, over the Afghan war crimes.

Thomson pointed to the other symbolic purpose of the visit, obliquely noting the "strategic importance" of the Townsville base. Since the US unveiled its military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific in 2011, a central focus has been on the development of capabilities in northern Australia, including through the establishment of a US marine base in Darwin.

In strategic circles, it is openly discussed that the purpose of this is to ready Australia to cut off Chinese supply lines that pass through the sea lanes of Southeast Asia and the Pacific in the event of war.

Dutton's statements have received an almost rapturous response from the most bellicose sections of the establishment. The *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who has the closest of ties to the US and Australian military-intelligence agencies, gushingly described Dutton's comments as "the clearest statement of purpose a defence minister has made in a long time." Sheridan has called for a rapid military build-up, to ready the armed forces for potentially imminent war.

While paying lip-service to the seriousness of the Afghan allegations, Sheridan insisted that the military "are not required to be the wokest force on the planet." Instead they are "required to master the application of deadly force" supposedly "to protect the peace."

In a *Foreign Policy* article last week, Salvatore Babones, a right-wing University of Sydney academic, outlined some of the domestic and international calculations behind Dutton's appointment. As a former police officer, who had presided over Australia's brutal attacks on refugees, Dutton could be a "tough cop on China."

Babones hinted at some of the behind-the-scenes discussions surrounding what Dutton described in the *Australian* as "grey-zone" conflict. "Australia's real threat from China is more likely to come in the form of a maritime militia disguised as fishing boats than an invasion strike force targeting Darwin, Australia, with advanced weaponry," he wrote.

"Given his experience 'stopping the boats' of people smugglers... Dutton has the right background for figuring out how to thwart China's irregular gray zone tactics for expanding its hold over the region's seas."

Babones continued: "As China's illegal fishing fleets creep closer to Australia's home waters, Australia should be prepared to tackle China's 'short-of-war' methods with a proportionate response of its own." The comments are a warning that various provocations that threaten a conflict are under discussion in military and intelligence circles.

Dutton's "minister of the soldiers" posture, moreover, is of a piece with a broader erosion of democratic rights, which he has been centrally involved in. More and more, as social tensions mount, the military is being held up as an unchallengeable institution with a central role to play, not only abroad, but also in domestic life. In the words of Dutton and Sheridan, they "represent the best of our nation."

The two policies that Dutton's elevation are aimed at furthering, war and authoritarianism, have the full support of the Labor opposition. In government when the Afghan war crimes were committed, Labor has joined with the Coalition to bury any discussion of the atrocities. It is also fully-committed to the aggression against China, a stance unanimously affirmed at its recent national policy conference.

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