

Afghanistan debacle sends shockwaves through Australian ruling circles

Mike Head
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The historic defeat suffered by the US, and its partners in Afghanistan, is producing deepening political heartburn in Australia's ruling class about the reliability of the 70-year-old US military alliance.

"Humiliating," "catastrophic," "devastating" and "panicked incoherence" are some of the words being used in the political and media establishment to lament the collapse of the corrupt puppet regime in Kabul, that was installed and propped up by violence, and billions of dollars in largesse, by the US and its allies, including successive Liberal-National and Labor governments in Australia.

The sour recriminations are combined with efforts to whitewash the 20-year criminal war of conquest, including the war crimes committed by Australia's Special Forces, and calls for a vast military expansion in order to confront China.

Gnawing at the Australian ruling class is the reality that the debacle suffered at the hands of the Taliban insurgency exposes the breakdown, not just of the brutal operation in Afghanistan, but the entire decades-long strategy of re-asserting US global hegemony by military force.

Australia's capitalist class has relied on the US for military and intelligence support, foreign investment and its own imperialist activities in the Indo-Pacific. That has been the case ever since the World War II fall of Singapore to Japan, in 1942, which demonstrated that its traditional protector, British imperialism, no longer had power in the Asia-Pacific region.

Moreover, over the past decade the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations have placed Australia increasingly on the frontline of the escalating US confrontation with China, which is by far Australian capitalism's largest export market.

Among those publicly raising concerns is one of the

previously staunchest advocates of the US alliance, the *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan. On Saturday, he reprised his recent series of columns, bitterly denouncing "the US humiliation in Afghanistan."

Sheridan's latest article was titled: "We can't rely on US military might, and our own is a joke." He began by hailing the acquisition of long-range missiles from the US that could address "our worsening strategic circumstances, specifically the threat of China."

Then Sheridan cited a "devastating podcast" by Coalition senator and former major general Jim Molan, warning that Australia's armed forces "could not last more than a week in a serious fight." It was, in Molan's words, "a one-shot defence force" that "absolutely lacks lethality and sustainability."

Sheridan insisted on a sharp increase in military spending, including on drone missiles, to "project power in our region," on top of the more than \$575 billion already earmarked for the armed forces over the next decade, as part of the preparations for a US-led war against China.

Another expression of the dismay was anguish over the apparent refusal of President Joe Biden to discuss the sudden fall of Kabul with Prime Minister Scott Morrison, or even stage a one-on-one meeting or video call with Morrison, for more than four months into Biden's presidency.

The evident nervousness within the Australian elite was that this snub could not simply be explained by hostility to Morrison personally, despite his close identification with Donald Trump.

The lack of communication reinforced doubts about the dependability of the US as a military ally, and Washington's readiness to abandon erstwhile allies in the pursuit of its own geostrategic interests, whether

under the banner of “Make America Great Again” (Trump) or “America First” (Biden).

September 1 marked the 70th anniversary of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty, signed in San Francisco to formally establish the military alliance, in response to the 1949 Chinese Revolution and the launching of the Korean War in 1950.

Last November, Morrison initially invited president-elect Biden to visit Australia to celebrate the anniversary, because the relationship was so “incredible,” “deep” and “personal,” but that invitation evidently fell on deaf ears.

By last Friday, Morrison had a video call with Biden, and claimed it was a “warm chat” and demonstrated “a very strong focus from the United States on the Indo-Pacific region.” The three-sentence White House readout, however, was perfunctory.

The anxiety in ruling circles, over the implications of the Afghanistan defeat, was highlighted by an accusation by former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating, that the Liberal-National government was leading Australia into a “strategic dead end” by “needlessly” provoking China.

In the wake of the Afghan disaster, Keating’s op-ed in the *Australian Financial Review* last week charged the Morrison government with “ignoring Australia’s interests” by pushing toward a confrontation with Beijing, “mainly to be seen in Washington as America’s fawning acolyte.”

In part, Keating’s column reflected the interests of the mining magnates and others, who have profited from exports to China for three decades. At the same time, he derided Washington’s aspirations of global dominance, in a manner that belied his own record as a loyal servant of the US alliance while in office, first as treasurer and then prime minister, from 1983 to 1996.

“China’s rise is simply not in the American playbook—its very existence and at this scale is an affront to America’s notion of itself as the exceptional state, the proselytiser of divine providence,” Keating wrote.

As he has for some years, Keating called for “an independent foreign policy” that did not subordinate “Australia’s interests” to “those of another country.” This nationalist response dovetails with those of figures, such as Sheridan and Molan, in the corporate

media and military-intelligence apparatus, demanding a military build-up to strengthen Australia’s strategic position, as US conflict with China looms.

This militaristic debate is also occurring in the face of an escalation of the class struggle internationally, under the impact of growing social inequality and the disastrous profit-driven policies of the world’s ruling classes, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers and youth need to reject the poisonous nationalism of all factions in this rancorous infighting. The developing movement of the working class must be provided with a socialist and internationalist perspective to put an end to the capitalist system, which is the source of war.



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