

Australian military analysts warn against a US-led war with China

Peter Symonds
27 February 2023

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published a two-part series on February 20-21 entitled “What would war with China look like for Australia?” It highlighted the growing fears in some ruling circles over the disastrous consequences of a US-led war with China amid the increasingly belligerent stance of Washington.

The article is based on interviews with, as the ABC described them, “four of Australia’s most experienced military strategists.” All hold “the highest security clearances that it’s possible to have” and “have been involved in sensitive military operations.”

The four are: Professor Hugh White, former deputy secretary for strategy and intelligence in the Department of Defence; Admiral Chris Barrie, defence force chief from 1998 to 2002; Allan Behm, former head of the International Policy and Strategy Divisions of the Defence Department; and Professor Clinton Fernandes, a former military intelligence officer.

None of them is in any sense anti-war or anti-imperialist. They represent a dissident faction of the ruling class deeply concerned about the economic and political implications for Australian imperialism of any involvement in a US-led war against its largest trading partner, China, with some advocating a more independent Australian foreign policy.

The fact that the state-owned national broadcaster has brought them together is striking confirmation that the time-line for US conflict with China is growing ever shorter. Under Trump and now Biden, the US has deliberately inflamed the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia—Taiwan—calling into question in ever-more open fashion the One China policy that has underpinned US-China relations since 1979.

As the ABC explained, the analysts interviewed are all “watching with great interest as the drums of war beat in some quarters regarding a possible war with China.” US war planning is far more advanced than that statement would suggest—as the four would know. In a leaked internal memo earlier this month, US four-star Air Force General Michael Minahan said he had a gut feeling the US would be at war with China over Taiwan in 2025. His memo, the first of many, ordered his commanders to make detailed preparations.

The ABC pointed out: “Australians could wake up one morning to the news that we are at war with China. Confronting as that would be, perhaps more confronting is something many people do not realise: such a decision would not require any consultation in parliament. The decision to go to war would not require a public discussion. It would not require the assent of the Governor General and is entirely in the hands of the prime minister of the day.”

Admiral Barrie made the starkest of warnings about a conflict with China. “The consequences for us would be very serious in terms of the Australian economy, the impact on the Australian people and the

ravages to our way of life throughout the land,” he told the ABC.

Unlike the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Barrie continued, that affected only the members deployed into the conflict and their families, a war with China would have an impact on all Australians. “Economically, financially and personally it is likely to impoverish us all; it may even kill most of us if it goes nuclear,” he said.

Hugh White pointed that a conflict with China would be devastating for Australia whether it joined or not. “Our economy would be paralysed as all trade with China and other major East Asian partners would stop dead and may not resume for a long time. If we joined the fight, or allowed US forces involved to operate from bases here, then there would be a clear chance that Australia would face direct attack from Chinese long-range forces.”

In reality, Australia would be involved in any US war with China from the outset. Over the past decade, Australian military forces and bases have been closely integrated into US plans for war with China. US Marines, warships and military aircraft, including nuclear-capable B-52 bombers, routinely “rotate” through northern Australia. Australia is a partner in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the US, Japan and India, as well as the AUKUS pact with Britain and the US that will provide Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines. The Pine Gap base in central Australia is indispensable to the US military’s intelligence-gathering, communications and targeting throughout Asia.

Asked what the US would require of the Australian military in a war with China, White declared: “US forces would be fully committed to the maximum of their capacity, and they would expect and indeed demand the same of us.” Asked about likely casualties, he concluded: “There would thus be a high chance that involvement in a war with China would swiftly exceed the toll in casualties suffered in Vietnam and Korea.”

Australian imperialism’s dependence on the US

Of the four analysts, Allan Behm was the most openly critical of Australian involvement in US past wars. “Australia is never reluctant to support and participate in American adventurism. Korea was an unnecessary war, as were the conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Vietnam and Iraq were illegal wars, with the US Administration(s) lying to their citizens and their allies about the strategic necessity and the morality of the use of armed force,” he told the ABC.

“Australia has a fundamental strategic pathology—to support the interests of the US at the expense of our own. A war with China over Taiwan, awful as that would be, involves no Australian national interests.” Behm criticised Liberal-National opposition leader Peter Dutton and Labor’s defence minister Richard Marles for adopting the

default position of “all the way with the USA” wherever and whenever.

What Behm declared to be “fundamental strategic pathology” is not, however, the product of wrong-thinking individuals, much less a national character flaw, but stems from the objective weakness of Australian imperialism, a middle-order power. It has always relied on the major imperialist power—first Britain, then the US since the middle of World War II—to prosecute its economic and strategic interests in the region and internationally.

Those like Behm advocating a more independent Australian foreign and military policy have been largely marginalised precisely because, as far as the dominant sections of the ruling class are concerned, it is a pipe dream. What is looming is not simply a US-China tussle over Taiwan but a far broader global conflict involving nuclear-armed powers—the opening shots of which already have been fired in Europe.

Washington regards its war with Russia in Ukraine as the prelude to a war with China, which it openly declares is the major danger to its global hegemony. Just as it has goaded Russia into a debilitating war in Ukraine, so the US is baiting China to attack Taiwan. The object of this utterly reckless policy is the same in each case—to undermine, destabilise, break up and ultimately subordinate both countries to US interests.

Significantly, none of the four analysts has a word to say about the Ukraine war or Australia’s involvement, despite its implications for a war in Asia. For all his denunciations of other US wars, Behm’s reaction to the eruption of the conflict in Ukraine was not critical of Washington or its predatory aims. Rather he insisted that the Australian government should take no part and focus its military efforts in Asia.

Much of the ABC articles is narrowly focussed on whether the US would win a war with China over Taiwan. After weighing up relative military strengths, the geography and possible Chinese strategies—Clinton Fernandes devotes his comments to the likelihood of a Chinese blockade rather than invasion of the island—all four conclude the outcome would either be a stalemate or a US loss.

Similar calculations are undoubtedly being made in the Pentagon and the White House, not only about the immediate military considerations but far broader political and strategic questions. Washington has been stepping up its preparations for war with China since President Obama announced the “pivot to Asia” in 2011 in the Australian parliament. Just as the US cannot afford to lose the war in Ukraine and is recklessly accelerating it, so its entire global position is at stake in a war with China. What might start as a war over Taiwan, with its population as cannon fodder, has the potential to rapidly escalate out of control, with catastrophic consequences for humanity as a whole.

As far as preventing the outbreak of a US war with China, the analysts hope to convince the very political and media establishment that is already signed up to US war plans, to perform an about-face. But the accelerating drive to war in the Indo-Pacific, like the war underway in Europe, is bound up with the immense and deepening crisis of global capitalism. Absent from the ABC discussion is any consideration of the basic economic, social and political forces driving US imperialism to war, and driving Australian governments to put the population on the frontline of the conflict.

Admiral Barrie repeatedly appeals for a change of heart. “Australia should take a position where averting war is a serious policy objective. This is a statesman-like response to the challenges we are addressing today wherein the risk of war has grown since 2017, in my opinion.”

But the capitalist politicians of today have all jumped on board the wagons of war as they careen towards disaster, not only to prosecute strategic and economic interests, but to divert massive social tensions that are already fuelling the class struggle internationally outwards against an external foe. Pleas for statesmanship in ruling circles will fall on deaf ears.

Far from lessening the commitment to US war plans, the Albanese Labor government has intensified it, outdoing the previous Liberal-National government, both in Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific, since it took office in May 2022. Barely a day goes by without a new announcement of increased weapon purchase, more military aid to Ukraine or US access to Australian bases. Albanese and his ministers have also stepped-up the anti-China witch-hunting and bullying of Pacific states that establish links with Beijing.

Strikingly, even after he has outlined the catastrophic consequences of a US war with China, Barrie does not rule out Australian participation in all circumstances. Asked if Australia should join, Barrie declares: “It depends. There are always a few possibilities that the right thing to do is to go to war irrespective of the expectation that we could ‘win’—whatever that means.” He only adds the caveat that “such possibilities seem remote at present.”

After the barbaric experiences of the Vietnam War and the US destruction of entire societies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, there is little popular support for further US-led wars. But that anti-war sentiment must not be diverted into support for the no less predatory interests of Australian capitalism.

No faith can be placed in any faction of the ruling class in Australia, the US or elsewhere to slow, let alone halt, the plunge toward a third world war and nuclear Armageddon. But the same contradictions of capitalism that are driving the ruling classes to conflict are propelling the working class in struggle. To the pressing social and economic demands of workers fighting to defend their jobs, conditions and wages must be added the necessity of building a unified anti-war movement of the international working class to prevent the outbreak of such a war by putting an end to the capitalist system that gives rise to it.

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