

Apron-string Australia Involving Itself in Other Nations' Wars

by James O'Neill via jill - Consortium News *Monday, Oct 24 2016, 12:34am*

international / prose / post

Since World War II, the U.S. has been the big boss leading a band of lackey nations, mostly in Europe but reaching distant Australia which tags along for the periodic pummeling of some hapless country.

For a country relatively remote from the world's trouble spots, Australia throughout its short history since European settlement in the late Eighteenth Century has shown a remarkable capacity to involve itself in other people's wars. With the possible exception of Japan in World War II none of these wars have posed a threat to Australia's national security.

In the 1850s, Australia provided troops on behalf of the British in the Crimean War at a time when few Australians would have been able to locate Crimea on a map. Ironically, Tony Abbott as Prime Minister this decade was willing to commit troops to Ukraine, again over Crimea.

But Australian knowledge of historical and geopolitical realities in Crimea appeared no greater in 2014 than in the 1850s. The major difference was the infinitely greater threat to Australia's national security if such a foolhardy plan had occurred in 2014 and Australian troops had found themselves confronting Russian forces.

Australian troops were also committed to the Boer War in South Africa, World Wars I and II, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, to name just the major conflicts. All of these involvements had two major characteristics in common: at no point (with the possible exception of Japan 1942-45) were Australia's borders or national security threatened; and each involvement was at the behest of a foreign imperial power, often on entirely spurious grounds. The last four named conflicts above – Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – had the added dimension of being contrary to international law.

A common justification advanced in support of these foreign adventures is that they constitute a form of insurance policy, with the deaths of tens of thousands of Australian servicemen and women being the premium that has to be paid. If we do not pay these premiums, the argument runs, the "policy" expires and our "great and powerful friends" – the United Kingdom and more recently the United States – will not come to our aid if and when we are, in turn, attacked.

It has never been clear just who these aggressors might be, despite endless manufactured potential foes, nor why Australia feels the need to base its foreign policy thus when scores of countries do not feel similarly threatened nor feel the need to pay such a price for their "security."

The capacity to have an intelligent debate about whether or not there are other, and better, options, is severely hampered by a number of factors. One of the major factors is the concentration of ownership of the mainstream print media. The Murdoch empire controls 70 percent of the nation's newspapers and is run by someone who is now an American citizen and no longer resides in Australia. The bulk of the balance is controlled by the Fairfax family who at least reside in Australia.

This concentration of ownership results in a degree of uniformity of opinion that Stalin would have

recognized and appreciated. There is a greater diversity of media ownership and opinion in modern Russia than there is in Australia, yet the relentless message in the Australian media is that Russia is an authoritarian state where dissent from an all powerful Vladimir Putin is discouraged or worse. Such a view would be laughable if it were not so dangerous.

The Pervasive ‘Group Think’

Academia is little better. The universities and the so-called “think tanks” rely heavily on subsidies from their American equivalents, or from Australian government departments committed to the government’s policies. There is an obvious reluctance to criticize, for example, American foreign policy when such criticism endangers funding sources, promotions, and comfortable sabbaticals in the U.S.

A recent example of the intellectual drivel that this can lead to was found in the recent publication of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute titled “Why Russia is a Threat to the International Order,” authored by Paul Dibb, a former spymaster. It was an ill-informed discussion all too typical of what passes for foreign policy analysis. Not only did it demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of Russian strategic policy, it wholly accepted an American-centered view of the world.

In Dibb’s world, the Americans only act from the best of intentions and for the benefit of the people unfortunate enough to be the object of their attentions. Any analysis of the way U.S. foreign policy is actually practiced is air brushed from the reader’s attention. The treatment of Ukraine is instructive in this regard.

Dibb completely ignores the February 2014 American-organized and financed coup that removed the legitimate Yanukovich government from power. Dibb ignores the military agreement that provided for the stationing of Russian troops in Crimea; that Crimea had for centuries been part of Russia until Khrushchev “gifted” Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 (without consulting the Crimeans); the overwhelming support in two referenda to secede from Ukraine and apply to rejoin the Russian Federation; the discriminatory treatment of the largely Russian-speaking population of the Donbass region in Eastern Ukraine; and the Kiev regime’s systematic violation of the Minsk Accords designed to find a peaceable solution to the Ukrainian conflict.

Instead, he writes that Russia’s “invasion” and “annexation” of Crimea and its attempt through military means to detach the Donbass region in the eastern part of Ukraine have to be seen as a fundamental challenge to the post-war sanctity of Europe’s borders. Such historical revisionism and detachment from reality is unfortunately not confined to Dibb. It is all too common in the Australian media in all its forms.

A selective view of the world, of which Dibb is but one example, extends to a sanitizing of the U.S.’s role in post-war history. The U.S. has bombed, invaded, undermined, overthrown the governments of, and destroyed more countries and killed more people in the process over the past 70 years than all other countries in the world combined. Its disregard for international law, all the while proclaiming the importance of a “rules based system,” is well documented.

A particularly egregious but far from unique example is the war in Syria in which Australia is also involved, even to the comical extent of admitting culpability in the “mistaken” bombing of Syrian government troops at Douma.

That the bombing was not a mistake but rather, as several commentators have pointed out (although never in the Australian media), was much more likely to have been a deliberate sabotaging by

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's Pentagon element of the American war machine of the Kerry-Lavrov negotiated partial ceasefire.

Syrian intelligence has reported intercepts of communications between the U.S. military and the jihadist terrorists immediately before the bombing in which their respective actions were coordinated. The bombing was followed by immediate terrorist attacks on Syrian army positions in the area and is highly unlikely to have been a coincidence.

Cozy with Terrorists

This is, of course, consistent with American policy in Syria from the outset. The U.S. government has sought to maintain a ludicrous distinction between "moderate" terrorists and the rest.

Before the Russian intervention at the end of September 2015, the U.S. managed to avoid actually stopping the Islamic State advance through large swathes of Syrian territory, and together with Washington's Saudi and Qatari allies have trained, financed and armed the terrorists from the outset. All of which is part of a pattern of U.S. support for terrorists, as long as they support U.S. strategic goals.

No such analysis appears in the Australian mainstream media which maintains an unswerving allegiance to only one form of analysis. This dangerous group think and intolerance of dissent is exemplified in a recent article by Peter Hartcher, the senior political correspondent of the Fairfax media.

Hartcher described what he called "rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows" by which he meant opponents in Australia of a war with China. The "rats" were politicians "compromised by China's embrace"; the "flies" are the "unwitting mouthpieces for the interests of the Chinese regime"; the mosquitoes were Australian business people "so captivated by their financial interests that they demand Australia assume a kowtow position"; the "sparrows" were Chinese students and Australia-Chinese associations that exist "specifically to spread China's influence."

In Hartcher's view all four groups were "pests" that needed to be eradicated. To call this reversion to the worst elements of 1950s McCarthyism is probably to do the late junior Senator from Wisconsin a disservice.

Were it simply a case of ignorance it might be simply consigned to the scrap heap where it richly belongs. But it is representative of the same mindset that has led Australia into so many disastrous foreign policy misadventures that it cannot be ignored. Another reason it cannot be ignored is that it represents and affects a widely held view among Australian politicians.

The demonization of Russia in general and Vladimir Putin in particular is clearly evident in the reporting of the situation in Ukraine and Syria. The ignoring of history and the inversion of reality is the default position. Everything that Russia does is a manifestation of its "aggression." Putin is commonly described as a "dictator" and the appalling Hillary Clinton even compared him with Hitler.

That there is not a shred of evidence to support the many wild allegations against President Putin does not prevent their regular repetition in the Western media.

Ignoring International Law

Similar blindness is evident with regard to the reporting on Syria. Australia is manifestly in breach of the United Nations Charter in its participation in the attacks upon the Syrian government and its forces. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's laughable defense of the presence of the Australian military in Syria, the central plank of which was specifically denied by the Iraqi government, was nonetheless accepted without question by the Australian mainstream media.

There is more preposterous posturing over the South China Sea. The much vaunted "freedom of navigation" demanded for shipping in the South China Sea (although no one can point to a single instance of civilian maritime traffic being hindered in any way) is a concept selectively applied. Just ask a Cuban, Palestinian or Yemeni if freedom of navigation is their recent or current experience of American policy.

Australia partakes annually in a U.S.-led naval exercise, Operation Talisman Sabre that rehearses the blockading of the Malacca Straits, a vital seaway for China that along with dozens of military bases (including in Australia), missile systems surrounding China, free trade agreements that pointedly exclude the world's largest trading nation, and many other aspects designed to "contain" China, are not the activities of a peacefully oriented nation.

Australia not only participates in clearly provocative actions, but the 2015 Defense White Paper is clearly predicated on planning a war with China. Public statements by senior defense personnel, both civilian and military, reflect a militaristic mindset vis-a-vis China that can only be described as magical thinking given the military capacity of the Peoples Republic of China to obliterate Australia within 30 minutes of hostilities actually breaking out is only part of the problem.

That such thinking takes place in a context where China, the perceived enemy, is also the country's largest trading partner by a significant margin and the source of much of Australia's prosperity over the past 40 years reveals a strategic conundrum that the politicians have singularly failed to come to grips with. Worse, it is not even considered a matter worthy of sustained serious discussion.

By its conduct both in Syria and the South China Sea, Australia runs the risk of becoming involved in a full-scale shooting war with both Russia and China. Viewed objectively, there is little doubt that in any such conflagration Russia and China enjoy significant military advantages. Even that superiority is not to be entertained. Instead, Australia pursues the purchase of hugely expensive submarines and F-35 fighter planes the strategic and military value of which is at best dubious and more probably, useless.

What then is the benefit to Australia of constantly putting itself in a position where the best it could hope for would be collateral damage? No rational human being would advance on a course of action where the detriments so significantly outweigh the benefits, so why should a nation be any different?

With its crumbling infrastructure, endless wars that it regularly loses, a corrupt money-dominated political culture, technologically inferior weaponry and enormous burgeoning debt, the U.S. is hardly a model protector. To believe otherwise is simply delusional.

As the U.S.-based Russian blogger Dimitry Orlov has recently pointed out, Russia's international conduct is governed by three basic principles: using military force as a reactive security measure; scrupulous adherence to international law; and seeing military action as being in the service of diplomacy. That clearly does not accord with the relentless misinformation Australians are constantly fed but to confuse propaganda with reality is a dangerous basis upon which to formulate foreign policy.

China is also choosing a radically different path in its international relations. The One Belt, One Road, or New Silk Road initiatives, associated as they are with a range of other developments, the significance of which most Australians barely grasp, has the capacity to transform the world's financial, economic and geopolitical structures in a remarkably short time.

The choice for Australia is stark. Does it persist in aligning itself with what the late Malcolm Fraser accurately called a "dangerous ally"? Or does it recognize that the world upon which its comfortable and dangerous illusions are based is rapidly changing and adjust its alliances accordingly.

At the moment Australia has the luxury of choice, but it is an opportunity that will vanish very quickly. Unfortunately, the lesson of history is that Australia will again make the wrong choice.

James O'Neill is a former academic and has practiced as a barrister since 1984. He writes on geopolitical issues, with a special emphasis on international law and human rights.

Copyright applies.

<https://consortiumnews.com/2016/10/19/australia-tagging-along-into-other-nations-wars/>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2386.html>