

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Fog of war

Once again, we are being confronted by the destructive force of war. So soon after the US-led military forces hastily withdrew from a broken and battered Afghanistan following two gruelling decades of war, the world is again reminded that even in the 21st century force is still used as the final arbiter. The daily destruction meted out by Russian armed forces across Ukraine run in parallel with the current genocide in Yemen, ongoing war crimes being committed in Syria and Palestine and the refugees still pouring across the world from the chaos and destruction left in Iraq and Libya. To grasp the nature of conflict, it is instructive to view each of them as toxic weeds. Conflicts develop deep roots, they need fertile grounds and constant tending. History shows that prolonged conflicts are nurtured by vested interests in government, private military contractors, war lords, and the media. Beneficiaries of armed conflicts invariably include the arms industry and political leaders in need of a boost in public support. Meanwhile, the civilians on the ground suffer death, destruction and are left with the debris of a broken society.

As the planet is subjected to the phenomena of *perpetual war*, political parties across the western world are gearing up for elections. The LNP has unveiled a khaki budget - with a tradie's hammer strapped to its side. It has dedicated billions of dollars more to further bolster defence and national security. It has promised multiple construction projects to appeal to the already booming trades sector. It is offering a one-off spray of gold coins aimed to woo voters with a fiscal sugar fix. But should the LNP government hold onto power, what will happen once the sugar fix ends? Will Australian's be better off? Why has tax reform been omitted from the election campaign? Why are the LNP and ALP not willing to address the growing number billionaires and rising profits by big corporations? What Australia needs are voters who can see beyond the gloss, the distractions and are willing to break through the status quo.

Perpetual war

Today, several conflicts are being waged across the world. As the Russian military invaded Ukraine in late February, Israel bombed Syria and the genocide in Yemen continues unabated. War is barbaric and people needlessly die. Each and every conflict deserves our anger and our outrage. The victims of war need to be remembered, and those who committed the crimes need to be brought to justice regardless of which country they inhabit.

Despite advances in communications, medicine and technology, humanity has not come far in terms of advancing peace and prosperity. In some respects, the world has changed little in the past forty years. In 1982, the world was divided, nuclear war was a real possibility, NATO's raison d'être was to oppose the military machine of Soviet block countries, proxy wars were being fought between the big powers, defence budgets continued to climb and a propaganda war was in full swing. 2022 is not very different.

For months, both the corporate owned and government-controlled media have been grooming the Australian public for conflict. The real or perceived threat from China has featured heavily in the billionaire-owned media. The diplomatic wrangling between Canberra and Beijing has helped the mainstream media conjure the sceptre of the Yellow Peril mark 2. Following the recent invasion of Ukraine, the corporate-owned media is busy resuscitating a new version of the Red Scare. The powerful forces behind the mainstream media are adept at presenting the public with a cartoon version of reality; good versus evil, right versus wrong. In reality, conflicts don't suddenly erupt overnight. They are usually a result of a complex chain of circumstances that have precipitated over years or decades. However, such complexities and the underlying dynamics that result in war are simply too hard to explain by the lazy mass media apparatus. With a public primed for war, all that is needed is a good dose of fear as an excuse to pry open the public purse.

The spoils of war

War is profitable and a prolonged war is very profitable. It is estimated that the conflict in Afghanistan cost the American taxpayer US\$ 2.76 trillion. Much of the proceeds from the US taxpayer flowed into arms giants such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon Technologies, General Electric, Honeywell and a host of military contractors supplying logistics, accommodation, security and communications. The conflict in Ukraine has brought to attention several members of congress who have been required to declare their recent purchases of shares in arms companies. It is estimated that over fifty US Congress members and members of their family already own shares in arms companies. Jim Cooper, a Democrat of Tennessee who chairs the House panel's Strategic Forces Subcommittee is reported to own up to \$65,000 worth of stock in General Electric. This leaves little to the imagination when it comes to issues of balancing national security with self-interest.

Following the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan, Raytheon Technologies CEO Gregory Hayes reported an estimated \$US 75 million revenue loss on top of another \$US 275 million loss related to supply chain and people issues. Despite the projected loss, Raytheon forecast back in January that annual full-year sales for 2022 would be in the range of \$US 68.5 billion to \$US 69.5 billion. The flood of weapons pouring into Ukraine, the bolstering of military budgets in NATO member nations and the US congress authorising an additional US\$25 billion that increases the annual defence spending to US\$768 billion guarantees a long and profitable war. This will tragically come at the cost of more Ukrainian lives should a diplomatic solution not be reached soon.

Naturally, a nation's security concerns should be foremost in the minds of policy makers. However, government officials, large corporations and powerful individuals all have agendas that are usually self-serving, and likely to lead to the deaths of innocent civilians. Given the conflict in Ukraine involves nuclear powers, the lack of diplomacy by the big powers is both as striking as it is telling.

History is a great teacher, and what is tragically unfolding in Ukraine is another proxy war between the world's largest superpower and its military block and a smaller power bent on drawing a line in the sand. The tragedy behind the needless death and destruction is that the planet is in a state of perpetual war moving from one senseless conflict to another, causing populations to be whipped up, whilst the dark elixir of nationalism distributed as war drums are beating in the background. Meanwhile public money is diverted from priority areas as health, education, housing, infrastructure and a myriad of social supports towards the purchase of military hardware.

A khaki budget

Following the diplomatic debacle switching from the purchase of French submarines to US nuclear submarines, and the creation of AUKUS, Australia has thrown in our lot with the USA as the sole guarantor of our security. As we firmly hitch ourselves to the leading superpower, we need to be reminded that the USA has grand global ambitions supported by the world's largest defence budget. The US has soldiers stationed across approximately 800 locations world-wide, a long record of invading nations and has attempted to overthrow over 72 governments since 1947. The Morrison-led coalition government has placed Australia alongside a declining superpower that is locked in a heated stoush with a nuclear armed power in eastern Europe, whilst it tussles with China in the Asia Pacific region. The US has passed the largest defence budget in the world in March this year; this is a clear signal that Australia will be expected to do its part as the big powers are willing to set aside dialogue and diplomacy and exercise hard power politics.

A hawkish corporate owned media has been busy pumping out the view that Beijing's ambitions go beyond the Indo-Pacific region, and Moscow's military objectives extend well beyond Ukraine's borders. The billionaire-owned media has promoted the line that Australia lacks preparedness for conflict and has been calling for the need to bolster defence spending. This angle has dove-tailed into the LNP's self-fulfilling prophecy that we are entering a 'period of profound uncertainty and disruption' which has featured in the 2022/23 budget papers. This effectively gives a green light to open up the taxpayer's purse to unprecedented military spending.

Approximately half of the \$575 billion of the defence spend will be directed into defence capabilities. This will include \$50 billion dedicated to naval ships, \$10 billion for naval infrastructure, and a \$38 billion injection to lift the defence workforce by 18,500 personnel. The budget has set aside \$3.5 billion for up to 75 US built Abrams tanks and armoured vehicles and \$1 billion for Howitzers and resupply vehicles. All up, the LNP's budget is dedicating the biggest military spend since the Cold War. In amongst this spend is \$137 million that will be channelled into maritime surveillance and Border Force's capabilities. The defence force will pocket an extra \$75 million to protect Australia's maritime interests. A tad over \$10 million will be dedicated for operations in the Middle East in the next financial year. It is estimated that more than half a trillion dollars will go towards Australia's defence forces by the end of the decade. According to Peter Dutton, the expansion of military spending "will make us a more credible partner with the United Kingdom, the United States and with NATO, and Japan and India." The same Peter Dutton whose solution to support flood affected Queenslanders was to spruik crowdfunding. Why is it that Australia is dependent on the myriad of charities relying on the good will of Australians? Where do our tax dollars go when government's fail to fulfil their role by helping Australian's in time of crisis?

The LNP's budget is evidence of a government out of steam and out of ideas. It lacks both the vision and the imagination to seriously address Australia's real problems. The budget does not address growing inequality in Australia. It does not tackle the climate emergency nor the fall of wages in real terms. It does not adequately support our education and health sector. The LNP lacks the compulsion to stem the burgeoning wealth of the nation's billionaires. One third of large corporations do not pay tax, yet the LNP have demonstrated their enthusiasm to hunt down citizens via the flawed automated Robodebt scheme for both infinitely smaller sums – some of which were altogether incorrect.

The flow of taxpayer funds into defence begs the question: can we afford not to prioritise health, education, social housing and the myriad of other gaping holes that Australians regularly fall into as government cutbacks grow deeper? Furthermore, defence spending invariably gets siphoned off into international companies and soaks up billions of dollars in budget blowouts and extended timelines. The Morrison-led LNP government's history of economic inefficiency, and mismanagement of taxpayer funds provides little confidence that the billions of dollars set aside for defence spending will be managed effectively with the necessary transparency and accountability expected of those in public office.

The LNP's budget is loaded with one-off sugar hits designed to fool the unsuspecting voter come election day. What happens the day after the fiscal high wears off?

See through the camouflage

The type of society that we live in depends on you and your ability to think critically. With a federal election to be called at any moment, it is your role to ask the hard questions, bring politicians to account, and demand transparency for government spending. Can we afford to channel billions of taxpayer dollars into the back hole of defence spending? The fact that the major political parties are eager to open the public purse at the possibility of a undefined threat sometime in the future ahead of real issues that are currently impacting Australians on a daily basis clearly indicates their inability to prioritise. The lack of public debate about the switch to nuclear submarines, the purchase of US tanks and military spending in general is concerning. With the constant beat of war drums leading up to an election, it is important to look beyond the major political parties who rely on a compliant and apathetic public willing to put up with the same old hollow men and women whose only aspiration is to maintain the status quo.

If you want a party that will call for substantial change based on the implementation of a universal basic income, increased funding for public education, better social housing and a treaty with the traditional owners of this land, then join PIBCI today so we can register as a political party. In the meantime, if you want to see change at the next federal election, seek independent parties who provide an alternative platform. The major political parties have run out of ideas, and lack the vision to develop and deliver a better future for all Australians.

The future is in your hands.

Anthony B – Website Editor
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