

John McCain in Australia

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Region: [Oceania, USA](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

There is no getting away from the fact that a visit to that known outpost of American Empire, Australia, softens the mind and leads to a more vigorous wagging of tongues than usual. Away from the scrutiny of a full blooded Washington press corps, politicians can engage in speculation and hyperbole. The paternalists can slip into something more comfortable, and lord over their retainers.

US **Senator John McCain**, one such paternalist on tour, was a true picture for budding psychologists on his visit down under. There was a chance for sightseeing in Australia, and offering what would amount to a more moderate touch than the US President.

Having expressed his deep concern at the exploits of the Trump administration, he was trying to hold things together - if only barely. In his sprinkling of views and addresses, the themes of stability and reassurance were pressing, neither of which are particular convincing in this age of Trump.

In a 30 minute address in the NSW State Library's reading room, McCain was hyping the paternal, familial line: Australians need not be worried that the Grand Uncle across the Pacific had, with a set of similar, affirmed values, forgotten them.

"I realise that I come to Australia at a time when many are questioning whether America is still committed to these values."



John McCain delivering a speech at the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Tuesday, May 30, 2017 (Source: ussc.edu.au)

These shared values, uttered like a Tibetan mantra, were those of "truth over falsehood, fairness over injustice, freedom over oppression, and the immortal spirit of humankind." [1] The United States was far bigger than "the person in the White House."

McCain's words offered a broader message about reassuring allies in a time where the soothsayers in Washington are finding themselves unwanted. Australia was by no means the only ally to be troubled, noted the veteran senator from Arizona.

"Other American allies have similar doubts these days. And it is understandable."

McCain has also granted his Australian audiences a set of remarks that can only, in the

scheme of things, be regarded as inane in their belligerence. For the 7.30 Report, McCain mused about such topics as Russian **President Vladimir Putin** and Islamic State.

“I think he is the premier and most important threat, more so than Isis.”

Out of the Cold War deep freeze, McCain insisted that action be taken against the Putin government. Despite admitting that there was no evidence that the Russian effort during the presidential elections had succeeded in altering the outcome, Moscow needed to be taught a lesson.

“So we need to have increased sanctions on Russia and enact other penalties for Russian behaviour.”

Such an addled assessment also came with another erroneous assessment: that the United States actually had a plan for Afghanistan. This should come as a surprise to any student of Afghan history with a rudimentary knowledge of empires. Afghanistan, after all, is where empires go, not so much to an old people’s home than a slaughterhouse to get daily nose bleeds.

Perplexingly, then, McCain claimed that Trump did have a magical grand strategy for “victory”. That would depend on whether he was going to accept the wise counsel of appropriate courtiers.

“I do believe that most of the time he accepts their advice and counsel. Can I tell you that he does all the time? No. And yes, does it bother me? Yes, it bothers me.”

Even as the senator was doing his Australian round, Kabul faced an attack which, even by the standards of recent decades, was exemplarily bloody. An explosive packed water tanker was detonated in the vicinity of the German embassy, including other missions and foreign media outlets, killing at least 80 and wounding 460.



Aftermath of the blast in Kabul, Afghanistan (Source: Pakistan Point)

Again, a security service that has all but failed, yet constantly propped up by the US and its allies, confirmed its inadequacy. The Afghan Intelligence Service, the NDS, did at least venture some speculation about where the attack came from. The Haqqani, Taliban-aligned network got the honours on that one.

Each disaster tends to be accompanied by a clarion call for more troops, for resources of boundless commitment and boundless enthusiasm. Afghanistan must be made an example of, developed, sorted and ordered.

From his summit as Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, McCain has called, along with his colleague **Lindsey Graham**, for the means to break the stalemate, as described by **Gen. John W. Nicholson**.

“President Trump and his administration,” both ventured in a co-authored piece for the Washington Post, “must treat Afghanistan with the same urgency as the fight against Islamic State, or this stalemate risks sliding into strategic failure.”[2]

Their stale suggestion for the stalemate: more troops, the abandonment of the onerous fixation with “force management levels”.

For all that, McCain’s visit to Australia posed an eye-rubbing reminder that Afghanistan is also the enigma beyond resolution, let alone interpretation. The senator would, however, have been pleased by one thing, a matter accomplished in joint self-deception with his hosts: the promise of a small deployment of 30 more Australian military advisors to the collapsing effort.

“These additional ADF members,” explained **Defence Minister Marise Payne**, “will allow Australia to commit additional advisers to further develop the long-term capabilities of the Afghan security forces as part of our current train, advise and assist mission.”[3]

Delusions die hard in Washington, but they die harder in Canberra.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/john-mccain-calls-on-australia-to-sustain-alliance-with-united-states-during-donald-trump-presidency-20170530-gwgp1y.html>

[2]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/john-mccain-and-lindsey-graham-why-we-need-more-forces-to-end-the-stalemate-in-afghanistan/2017/03/13/6c8f7a6e-05b4-11e7-b1e9-a05d3c21f7cf_story.html?utm_term=.91578ea263e8

[3] <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/05/29/australia-send-30-more-troops-afghanistan>

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