

Wanting War over Taiwan: Australia's Gang of Five

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Diligently, obediently and with a degree of dangerous imbecility, a number of Australian media outlets are manufacturing a consensus for war with a country that has never been a natural, historical enemy, nor sought to be. But as Australia remains the satellite of a Sino-suspicious US imperium, its officials and their dutiful advocates in the press seem obligated to pave the way for conflict.

The latest example of this came in articles run in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age of Melbourne*. The premise is already clear from the columnists, Peter Hartcher and Matthew Knott. Australia faces a "Red Alert", and, to that end, needs a warring fan club. Not since the domino theory bewitched strategists and confused military planners have Australians witnessed this: a [series of articles](#) featuring a gang of five with one purpose: to render the Australian public so witless as to reject any peaceful accommodation.

First, the provocative colouring for the [article](#), "How a conflict over Taiwan could swiftly reach our shores." The Australian continent is shown bathed in a sea of red. Various military bases and facilities are outlined. For good measure, there is a picture of Australian soldiers firing an artillery piece in "military exercises in 2018 at Shoalwater Bay, Queensland."

Then, the blistering opening lines of terror. "Within 72 hours of a conflict breaking out over Taiwan, Chinese missile bombardments and devastating cyberattacks on Australia would begin. For the first time since World War II, the mainland would be under attack." The authors already anticipate a good complement of US troops to occupy the Australian north, some 150,000 "seeking refuge from the immediate conflict zone."

The *Red Alert* panellists, anointed as "defence experts", brim with such scenarios. All, as they state in a joint communique, agree on one thing: "Australia has many vulnerabilities. It has long and exposed connections to the rest of the world - sea, air and undersea - yet is incapable of protecting them."

Leading the gang of five is Peter Jennings, who has had an unshakeable red-under-the-bed fantasy for years. A former deputy secretary for strategy in the Australian Defence Department, and steering the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) for a decade (that's

Canberra's revolving door for you), Jennings is adamant and steely. "As I think of a conflict over Taiwan, what I'm thinking about is something that very quickly grows in scale and location."

There is no reason at all why such a growth in scale or location should happen, but this is not the purpose of the exercise. The point of the *Red Alert* fantasy is to neutralise the significance of Australia's natural boundaries – some of the most formidable on the planet – and dismiss them in any conflict with Beijing. "Distance is no longer equivalent to safety from our strategic perspective," ponders Jennings.

Jennings inadvertently reveals the case against war, which can only be an encouragement to activists and officials keen to reverse the trend of turning Australia into a US imperial outpost of naval and military bases that would be used in any Taiwan conflict. "If China wants to seriously go after Taiwan in any military sense, the only way they can really contemplate quick success is to pre-emptively attack those assets that might be a threat to them. That means Pine Gap goes." Pine Gap remains that misnamed joint US-Australian signals facility that has facilitated illegal drone strikes in foreign territories most Australian politicians would fail to find on a map.

Oddly enough, the columnists then suggest that Jennings is breaking the "powerful unwritten rule in Australia" which involves not mentioning war. This is fabulous nonsense, given the trumpeting and screeching for conflict that has come from ASPI for some years now.

Lavina Lee, another *Red Alert* panellist, is also into the business of softening the Australian public for war, or at least "the possibility that we might go to war, and what would happen either way. We should talk about what we would look like if we win and what it would look like if we lose." And what about peace, a word finding its way into Canberra's garbage tip of taboo words?

Australia's former chief scientist, Alan Finkel, dolls out his own catastrophic scenario. "Airlines in particular can be taken down very, very easily." He goes on to suggest that the challenges to electricity will be more resistant, as "most of our generators are not that sophisticated in terms of cyber. They will be [more sophisticated] five to 10 years from now. Things like the telephone network and airlines are very obvious targets."

Retired army major-general Mick Ryan makes his contribution by wishing Australia to be readied for war. In a message common to most military officers, the civilians should really do more about giving his brethren more cash. "Like most other Western militaries, we believe in the cult of the offensive, so we have underinvested in defensive capabilities." He also fears that any war over Taiwan would "involve strikes on US bases, on fuel and munition holdings, ships across the region, including our own country potentially".

Lesley Seebeck, former head of the Australian National University's Cyber Institute, completes the crew of five, and laments the "state of our critical infrastructure" that has just been left to lie. "There is no sense of investing for the future." Perversely enough, Seebeck's view reads amusingly when considered alongside Finkel, who points out that more sophisticated cyber-infrastructure in the future, rather than clunkier systems with greater redundancies, would actually make Australia more vulnerable. Sometimes, it pays to keep the old.

A few things are worth noting in this frothy mix of fantabulation and establishment fire breathing. In the quest to gather such a panel, no effort has been made to consult the expertise of a China hand. That lobby, able to provide a more nuanced, less heavy-footed approach, is being shunned, their advice exorcised in any effort to encourage war.

Bizarrely, the panellists offer an increasingly popular non-sequitur that has crept into the warmonger's manual: Would Australia's leaders, in war, pass the Zelensky test? This somehow implies that the Ukraine conflict offers salient lessons over a war over Taiwan, an absurd comparison that muddled strategists are fond of making.

Most of all, Beijing's own actual intentions over Taiwan are to be avoided. The presumption in ASPI-land is that a war is imminent, and that Beijing would want to go to war over the island as a matter of course. China's President Xi Jinping's main advisor on the subject, veteran ideologue Wang Huning, suggests an approach at odds with such thinking.

The *Red Alert* exercise has drawn necessary and important criticism. Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating did not mince his words in a [fuming column](#) for *Pearls and Irritations*. "Today's *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* front page stories on Australia's supposed war risk with China represents the most egregious and provocative news presentation of any newspaper I have witnessed in over fifty years of active public life." One might even go further back than that. The war times are coming, and as are those gangs seeking to encourage them.

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