

Afghanistan recriminations, cover up and calls for anti-China offensive in Australia

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As in the US, UK and other imperialist centres, the response of the Australian ruling class to the historic debacle suffered by the US and its allies in Afghanistan is a mixture of bitter recriminations, lies to smother the criminal character of the 20-year war and preparations for a much greater military conflict, against China.

Nevertheless, the shock provided by the rapid and ignominious collapse of the puppet regime funded and armed to the tune of trillions of dollars by Washington and its partners, and at the cost of some 200,000 lives, is particularly profound for Australia's capitalist elite. It has depended heavily on the US since World War II for its own imperialist activities in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations have placed it increasingly on the frontline of the escalating US confrontation with China.

When the federal parliament opened yesterday, the proceedings provided a glimpse of the anxiety. The start of question time was delayed to allow statements on Afghanistan from the Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Opposition Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese, Defence Minister Peter Dutton and Labor's shadow defence minister Brendan O'Connor.

All these speakers are directly implicated in the Afghan disaster. In 2001, the Howard Liberal-National government, backed by the Labor Party and the Greens, was one of the first in the world to join the US-led invasion. Likewise, in 2010 the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard was one of the few internationally to participate in the murderous "surge" of US forces ordered by the Obama White House to try to forestall the collapse of the Kabul regime. Soon after being installed in office in mid-2010 Gillard declared that troops would remain in Afghanistan for at least a decade.

Morrison told parliament that the "Australian sacrifice" made by tens of thousands of soldiers and other personnel in Afghanistan had been "worth it" despite the return of the Taliban and the chaotic departure from Kabul. In fact, he declared, the invasion and long military occupation of the impoverished country had been a "noble endeavour."

Morrison recited the lies produced by the George W. Bush administration, and embraced by the entire Australian political and media establishment, in an attempt to justify the invasion.

"In 2001, when the Taliban refused to hand over al-Qaeda terrorists, Australia supported a US-led operation to root out and eliminate the capacity to stage more attacks against the West from Afghanistan," he said.

Equally committed to shoring up the US alliance, Labor leader Albanese was virtually indistinguishable. Although the war had not ended "how we wanted," it had seen "early success" in ridding Afghanistan of terrorism. And "we must try to draw some solace from the thought that the vast majority of Afghan lives touched by Australians were touched for the better."

Albanese made no attempt to square this claim with the disintegration of the Kabul regime, which had presided over mass poverty, obscene inequality and gross corruption, as well as police-state repression, torture chambers and US bombings and drone assassinations.

Nonetheless, Albanese gave some idea of the underlying political crisis. He warned that the events in Afghanistan were "devastating" and "traumatic." This would have implications for "global power relationships" and for "our security" that would "reverberate through at least this generation."

Some of the media commentary by figures closely tied to the US military-intelligence apparatus points to the depth of this turmoil.

The *Australian Financial Review*'s opinion section on Monday featured ex-Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who bears a major responsibility for the catastrophe as a key figure in the Howard government. He wrote that the scenes from Kabul had shaken his lifelong faith in America's will to fulfil the role it has played since World War II as the supposed global defender of "freedom and democracy." He concluded that Australia had to build its own military capacity and alliances.

In Tuesday's *Australian*, foreign editor Greg Sheridan reprised an earlier column in which he declared the debacle to be the "most comprehensive and colossal failure of Western power in decades." He wrote: "On Monday, our national leaders, Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese, and their deputies and defence spokesmen made a well-motivated first pass at accounting for the Afghanistan war and its bitter outcome... But there is one thing they could not bring themselves to say. This Afghanistan adventure was,

strategically, a complete and absolute disaster.”

These recriminations are accompanied by denials of the actual character of the invasion of Afghanistan.

The truth is that the war was never about protecting the world from terrorism. In the first place, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalist organisations were backed and fomented by Washington during the 1980s, largely in order to overthrow the previous Soviet-sponsored government in Afghanistan.

After that, Washington initially worked with the Taliban during the Clinton administration as a means of securing control of the country’s resources and a foothold in the geo-strategically critical Central Asian region.

When the Taliban proved unable to stabilise the country, US ruling circles drew up plans in the late 1990s—well before the still-unexplained 9/11 terrorist attacks—to invade both Afghanistan and Iraq in order to exploit the dissolution of the Soviet Union and assert hegemony over Eurasia, against both Russia and China.

Most directly, the Afghanistan intervention sought to impose a military presence in areas that had been inaccessible to the US from the time of the October 1917 Russian Revolution. Under the auspices of its “war against terrorism” the US established, for example, a huge air base in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, which borders China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

This was accompanied by the neo-colonial hubris, echoed throughout the political and media elites in Australia, that “force works” and the US would create a “new world order.”

Albanese’s declaration that Afghan lives were touched by Australian forces for the better is an absurd and flagrant lie. The barbaric nature of the war inevitably produced atrocities, as the occupying troops resorted to brutal methods to suppress resistance to the occupation.

Even according to the heavily censored official inquiry report that was finally published last year, Australian Special Forces units murdered at least 39 prisoners of war or innocent civilians and committed many other abuses, including “cruel” treatment (i.e. torture), the use of illegal weapons and the desecration of victims’ bodies.

Statements from Afghan families and organisations indicate that many more were killed. Special Forces recruits were even “blooded” by being ordered to kill captured detainees. This cannot be explained as the actions of isolated “rogues.” The entire war was a ruthless operation to terrorise the population and crush opposition to the imposition of US control over the country.

By one estimate, the Australian war effort cost \$9 billion. That is enough to build hundreds of hospitals and schools, both in Afghanistan and Australia. The 39,000 soldiers sent, on repeated rotations, to fight this barbaric war also paid a heavy price—41 were killed and 261 were injured. That does not count the 500 veterans who committed suicide during the war.

Far from retreating from militarism in response to the debacle in Afghanistan, the US and its allies are already seeking to ready their populations for an even more disastrous war against China in order to reassert the Asia-Pacific and global dominance obtained by the US through World War II.

In fact, beneath the hypocritical hand-wringing about the plight of the Afghan people, hopes are being expressed that the departure from Afghanistan can clear the decks for such a conflagration.

Tuesday’s *Australian Financial Review* editorial typified a growing chorus in the corporate media. “The withdrawal from Afghanistan will create further strategic space for the Biden-led US to continue its pivot towards the main game of geopolitical competition with assertive China in the Indo-Pacific region,” it declared.

“How America comes back from defeat in Afghanistan, and shapes up to the rising China challenge, is what will ultimately matter long after the images of the fall of Kabul become just recurring Facebook memories.”

These demands are being accompanied by those from others, like Downer, advocating a further military buildup in Australia, on top of the more than \$575 billion already earmarked for the armed forces over the next decade.

One of the most strident and anxious calls came from Peter Jennings, the executive director of the US-connected and government-subsidised Australian Strategic Policy Institute. In an opinion piece published by the *Australian*, he indignantly lamented the US-led defeat in Afghanistan and wrote:

“The US urgently needs to rethink how it will defend its interest globally against China ... We cannot assume the US will just be over the horizon ready to defend our strategic interests... A greater Australian defence effort is the best thing we can do to ensure the US stays committed to our security.”

These militarist responses demonstrate that there is only one way to end the violence of US and Australian imperialism and prevent even greater catastrophes. It is bound up with the struggle to put an end to the capitalist profit system, which bears full responsibility for imperialist war and its crimes.



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