

Not fit for purpose: Australia's alliance with the United States

By Cameron Leckie – 23 March 2022

Australia needs the United States for defence. But Australia only needs defence because of the United States.

Malcolm Fraser

Introduction

I begin today by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we respectively meet, in my case that of the Yuggera people, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

'A strong and deep alliance [with the United States] is at the core of Australia's security and defence planning' states the 2016 Defence White Paper. This evening I will argue that our defence strategy based upon this alliance is not fit for the purpose of defending our country, nor furthering our interests relating to prosperity, sovereignty and democracy.

I will cover the following:

- What is the United States?
- The trajectory of the United States
- The future of the United States imperial system
- What is driving the United States?
- In whose interests does the United States act?
- Summarise why our current defence strategy is not fit for purpose
- Sketch out an alternative defence strategy for Australia

What is the United States?

The United States has been called many things. A superpower. A hyperpower. The global hegemon. The exceptional nation. It is clearly not a normal country given its outsized influence in the world.

In times past it would have been called an empire, and whilst an unpopular term at present, it is a term that helps explain both its behaviour and future prospects.

John Michael Greer in his 2014 book 'Decline and fall: The End of Empire and the future of democracy in 21st century America' defines an empire as:

"an arrangement among nations, backed and usually imposed by military force, which extracts wealth from a periphery of subject nations and concentrates it in the imperial core."

Empires are in effect a wealth pump. A wealth pump that enriches one country, the imperial nation, at the expenses of others. The wealth pump effect of the United States imperial system enabled its population, about 5% of the world's population, to consume one quarter of the world's energy and one third of its industrial production for much of the second half of the 20th century.

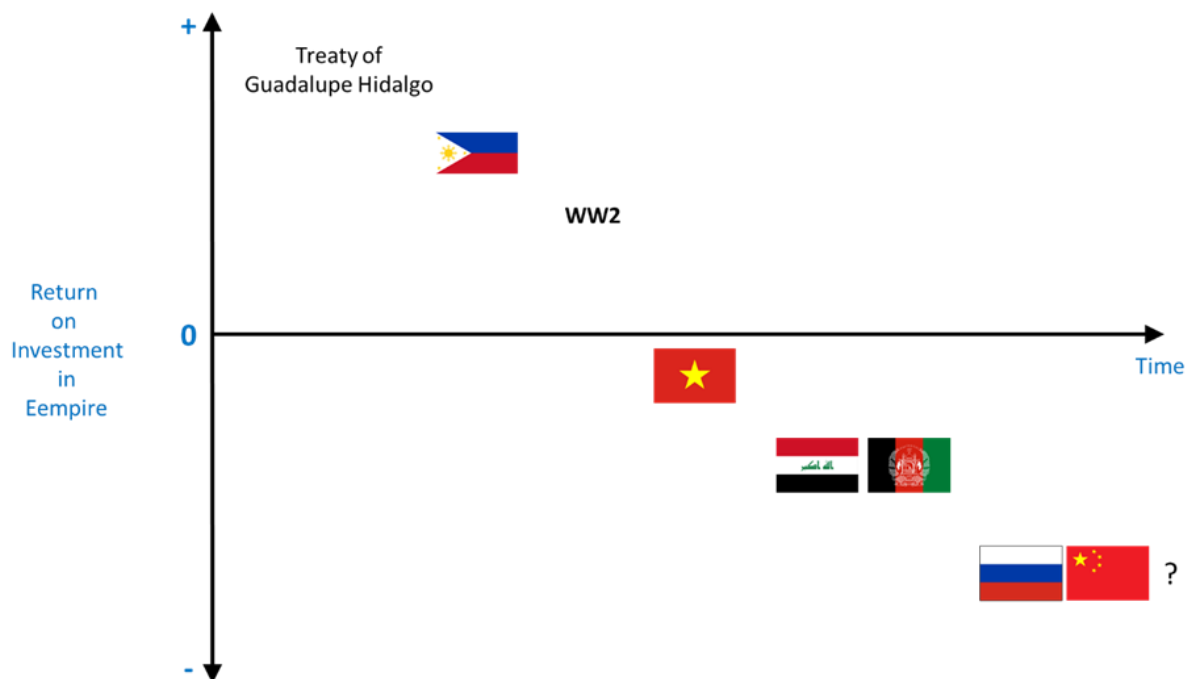
This concentration of wealth did not happen by accident. It is a direct result of the United States imperial system through institutional apparatus, military force, support of its Western allies and most importantly of all the role of the United States dollar as the world's reserve currency, something which I will talk about in more detail shortly.

The trajectory of the United States

Anthropologist Professor Joseph Tainter's book 'The Collapse of Complex Societies,' provides a theoretical model that explains why societies, or of relevance here, empires collapse.

The basis of his theory was that societies/civilisations/empires are problem solving organisations that increase in complexity to address problems. Over time societies reach the point of diminishing marginal returns in their investment in complexity. At this point societies are at risk of a collapse when either new problems arise and/or the energy and resources required to maintain complexity become insufficient.

This situation is applicable to the United States today.



In 1848, at the end of the Mexican-American War, the US gained a huge amount of territory, including California, Texas, Colorado and New Mexico. The return on investment was enormous, the resources of the new territories enabling the US to become the economic powerhouse that it was throughout the 20th century. The acquisition of the Philippines and Cuba were other imperial additions that had a large positive return on for minimal investment.

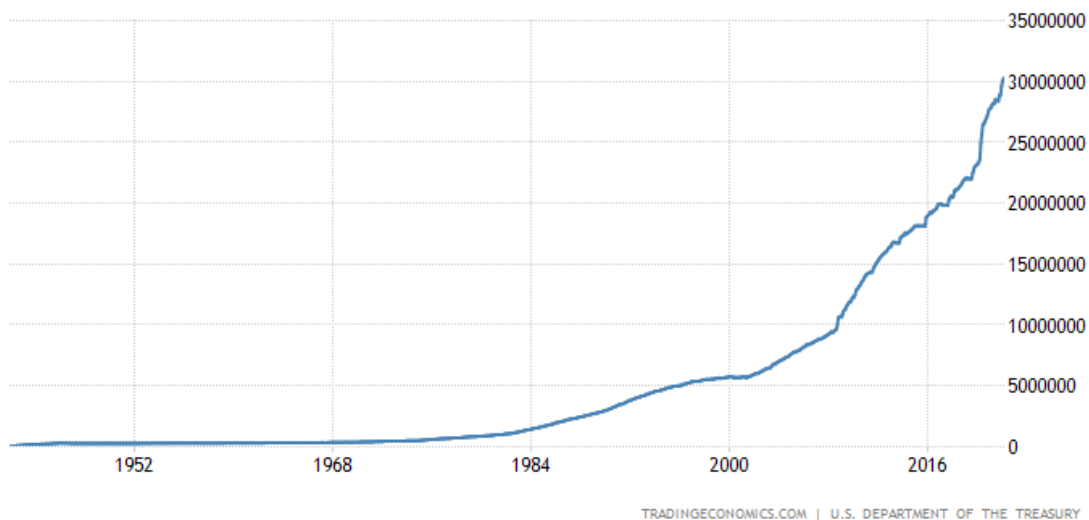
At the end of the World War Two, the United States was the world's creditor, the leading producer of oil and a manufacturing powerhouse whose industry had not been damaged by the war, unlike all of the other major powers. Whilst its return on investment was still in the positive, it was less than that of previous initial periods of imperial expansion.

Since the end of World War Two the returns on investment have turned negative. The costs of the Vietnam war for example were a major factor in forcing the US Government to abandon the Gold Standard, yet the US lost this conflict.

The combined cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to Brown Universities 'Cost of War' project, was \$8 trillion for little gain and increasing resistance against the United States.

The cost benefit ratio of US attempts to 'contain' both Russia and China at this stage are unknowable, but the potential costs are extremely high, the benefits uncertain.

US Government



Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/government-debt>

Not surprisingly, whilst the return on investment in empire has turned negative, over the same period there has been an exponential growth in US Government debt.

Returning to Tainter's thesis, we can see that the United States return on investment in empire is in a prolonged downwards trajectory. Yet the United States faces a series of very serious external and internal issues placing it at grave risk of imperial collapse. We can see this through the prism of the US dollar.

The future of the United States imperial system

In 2018 I submitted an essay to the Australian Defence Force Journal, which was not published, titled the 'Shaky Foundations of Australian Defence Policy.' The 'shaky foundation' was Australia's reliance on the United States and the assumption that it would remain the pre-eminent global military power.

My thesis was, and remains, that the imperial system of the United States was in terminal decline. I examined this proposition through an analysis of the United States centre of gravity and the pillars that support this centre of gravity. In military terms the centre of gravity is defined as the "key characteristic, capability or locality from which a military force, nation or alliance derives its freedom of action, strength or will to fight."

James Rickards, author of *Currency Wars*, argues that 'America's unique military predominance can be maintained only with an equally unique and predominant role for the [US] dollar.'

Or a more [colourful](#) way of describing the importance of reserve currency status:

"quality of life in the United States and our nation's entire economy is an elephant balancing, on one leg, on the toothpick of the U.S. dollar's reserve status"

The United States dollar as the world's primary reserve currency is clearly the United States centre of gravity.

The four pillars that support this centre of gravity are military dominance, information dominance, economic dominance and supportive client states. In the essay I examined each of these pillars in

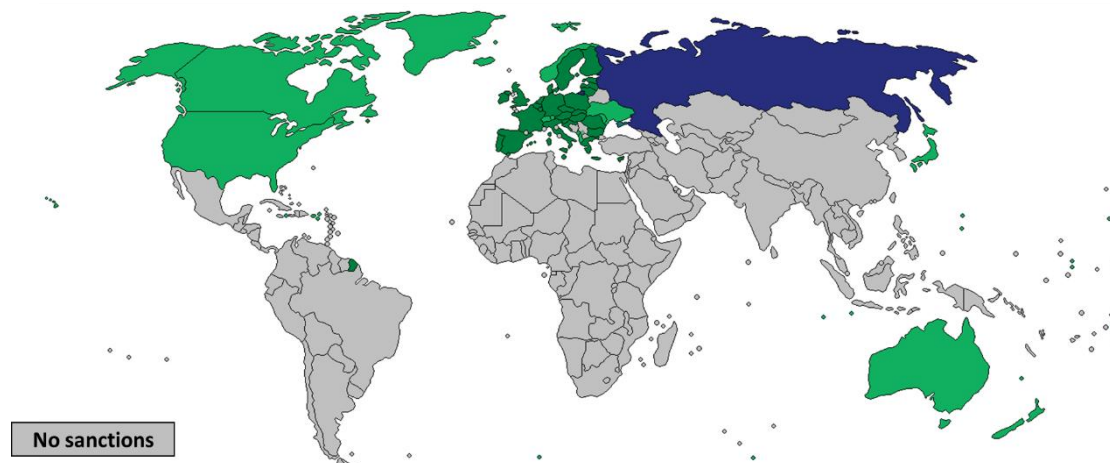
detail and concluded that ‘sooner or later one or more of these pillars will reach a critical state beyond which the whole edifice will collapse.’ We are witnessing this collapse in real time.

Exhibit one is the reckless, short sighted and counterproductive sanctions by the United States and its Western allies on Russia.

The seizure of Russian financial assets, following on from seizure of Afghanistan’s Central Bank reserves and sanctions against dozens of countries is destroying/has destroyed trust in the dollar. It is also rapidly accelerating the de-dollarisation trend – Saudi Arabia is developing mechanisms to sell oil in the Chinese yuan, India and Russia selling oil outside the dollar being very recent example. Meanwhile these sanctions are in the process of furthering an inflationary crisis within the US itself and its European allies. It does not yet seem to have dawned on Western Governments that these sanctions will damage their economies more deeply and for a longer period than they will Russia. Shooting yourself in the foot is an appropriate description of the sanctions policy.

Meanwhile outside of the West, virtually no country is sanctioning Russia. A clear message indicating that the winds of change are blowing.

Countries that have not sanctioned Russia



What is driving the United States?

At the end of the Cold War, the United States, enjoyed what was labelled as the ‘unipolar moment’ defined as:

“The center of world power is an unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies.”

The ideological internalisation of US exceptionalism and triumphalism of the ‘unchallenged superpower’ was highlighted in the Wolfowitz doctrine:

“Our **first objective** is to **prevent the re-emergence of a new rival**, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and

requires that we endeavor to **prevent any hostile power** from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be **sufficient to generate global power.**"

Whilst this text never made it into the official Defence Planning Guidance, such a position appears to be front and centre of the world view of much of the political class of the United States.

The resulting hubris is a major factor which has led the United States to doing its very best to squander the unipolar moment in a historically short period of 30 years. The growing recognition of this, whether consciously or unconsciously underpins, the growing desperation that is driving the United States

A few quotes to support this position.

M H Bhandakumar, a retired Indian diplomat:

*'Fundamentally, what the Western powers are planning is a form of **neo-colonialism** borne out of the **desperate need to arrest the decline of their economies through a massive transfer of wealth** from the rest of the world inhabited by 88 percent of mankind — Asia, in particular.'*

Gilbert Doctorow (a professional Russia watcher):

*It is long past debate whether the conflict is merely between two neighboring countries at the eastern fringe of the European Union. It is a **full-blown proxy war between the United States of America and the Russian Federation**, and it is about **ending or perpetuating American global hegemony.** "*

Andrei Raevsky (former Swiss military intelligence officer), writing in 2017:

*'I am often asked if the US and Russia will go to war with each other. I always reply that **they are already at war.** Not a war like WWII, but a war nonetheless. This war is, at least for the time being, roughly 80% informational, 15% economic and 5% kinetic. But in political terms the outcome for the loser of this war will be no less dramatic than the outcome of WWII was for Germany: **the losing country will not survive it, at least not in its present shape: either Russia will become a US colony again or the US Empire will collapse.**'*

These insights highlight the nature of the game that is being played. It is a game of the highest stakes for all of the major players, it is an existential game. And it explains the ever-increasing belligerence of the United States towards both Russia and China over recent years which can be explained simply as:

$$\text{Level of US belligerence} = \frac{1}{\text{Relative power}}$$

The US appears to be completely unwilling to accept any situation where it is not the world's dominant power and countries that are considered to be adversaries to the US are not willing to submit to US global hegemony. Clearly, we are in very dangerous times.

In whose interests does the United States act? In whose interest will the United States act?

Lord Palmerston, the long dead British Prime Minister stated:

“We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

It would be wise for Australia to remember this.

Time and time again the United States has let down its ‘allies.’

Examples include the South Vietnamese, the Kurds, the Afghani’s and the people of Ukraine. And it is not just peripheral allies that the United States lets down.

From the State Department website:

“France is America’s oldest friend and Ally. Our relationship is built upon our shared commitment to the same values – democracy, human rights, the rule of law, security, and prosperity. The closeness of our military, economic, and political cooperation form the basis of our enduring partnership.”

Even America’s oldest ally can be betrayed, as demonstrated by AUKUS and the cancellation of the nuclear submarine deal.

The United States also has a record of letting down Australia as well.

From the failure to provide the surveillance footage of the MH17 shootdown which the then Secretary of State John Kerry publicly stated the United States had in the days after this tragedy, to the failure to warn Australia of the impending assassination of Iranian General Soleimani in 2020, an act that placed Australian Defence Force personnel at risk, to replacing Australian trade with China, it should be clear that the United States will always place its interests first.

Not fit for purpose

The primary justification for Australia’s alliance with the United States, from Australia’s perspective, is simple. It is to enhance our security by deterring, and potentially responding to, external aggression. The provision of this security then underpins our prosperity and everything else that we hold dear.

Based on the preceding analysis however, we can now summarise why Australia’s alliance with the United States is no longer fit for this purpose.

- Firstly, The United States will act in its interests, not ours.
- Secondly, the United States imperial is in a terminal and accelerating decline. Therefore, its capacity to provide Australia with security is diminishing and will continue to diminish over time.
- Thirdly, the desperation to maintain its position in the world makes the United States extremely dangerous at this point. Rash decisions are likely.
- A by-product of this desperation is the risk to Australian sovereignty and democracy. Take for instance a conflict breaking out in the South China Sea or over Taiwan. The Australian Government would be under immense pressure to support the United States. Effectively we would be supporting such a conflict regardless of any Government decision because of US bases within Australia and the logistical and intelligence support they provide. In other words, we could effectively be at war by default. There is no plausible outcome in this instance where Australia wins. We have actually boxed ourselves into a lose – lose scenario. If the US is successful in the conflict then Australia’s largest trading partner could suffer irreparable damage to its economy which would flow back to Australia’s prosperity. And if the US loses, which the past 17 wargames suggest that they could well, then the best that

Australia can hope for is that the Chinese treat us better than the British and French treated the Chinese after the Opium wars.

An alternative defence strategy for Australia

Australia is not the only country in the world with difficult strategic circumstances. However, a country with a clearly more challenging strategic circumstances than Australia, Vietnam, offers a model against which an alternative defence strategy Australia could be developed.

The core principles of Vietnam's National Defence Strategy are:

- No military alliances or siding with one country against another.
- No foreign military bases on its soil.
- No use, or threat, of force in international relationships.
- Promotion of defence cooperation with other countries to address common security challenges and develop its own capabilities.

Despite bordering China and having a historically difficult relationship including being invaded by China numerous times over the centuries, Vietnam's last war was in 1979 and its defence spending as a proportion of GDP has been stable for decades at just over two percent.

This set of principles, particularly with the advantage of our geography, could form the basis of an alternative defence strategy.

It would still require:

- Appropriately trained and equipped Australian Defence Force, but one focused on the defence of Australia rather than expeditionary operations.
- A much-enhanced diplomatic capacity and capability. As retired diplomat Bruce Haigh has pointed out, it appears that ASPI has taken the lead on the provision of foreign policy advice over that of DFAT. We urgently need to rid ourselves of the 'khaki tinge' that is influencing Australian foreign policy.

The elephant in room is of course the 'threat' of China. This is a topic of much debate, much of it in my view hyperbole and projection. The key question I think we should be asking is whether the Australia's risk of being involved in a conflict, an unwinnable conflict from Australia's perspective, is greater if we are in an alliance with the United States or if we have an independent defence and foreign policy. Based on the preceding analysis I would suggest that on the balance of probabilities we face much less of a threat from China if we have an independent foreign policy.

My final point is that we need also need to sort out key domestic issues as an integrated part of a national defence strategy. Our vulnerability to climate change, and our extreme dependency on imported liquid fuels subject to price, geological and geopolitical risk, pose a far more immediate and direct threat to our national security and prosperity than any military threat at this point or for the foreseeable future.

Australia has all of the pre-requisites necessary to defend ourselves. Our geography is favourable. We are a wealthy country. We have an educated population. We don't need the United States, it is an unnecessary and rotting crutch. All we lack is the confidence to defend ourselves on our own. What we need is leadership.

Thank you