Ex-Service Member EXPOSES Submarine Scam: AUKUS Fooled Australia | Major Cameron Leckie

Here is the latest trick of the US Empire of war: Sell a hyper expensive submarine to a willing victim, cash-in immediately, hold off on delivery indefinitely, but get port access rights away. Sweet, sweet deals... for the empire of lies, paid for by Australian tax dollars, and maybe soon Australian blood if the weaponization of the continent for the geopolitical games of Washington continues. Former Australian Army major, Cameron Leckie, joins Pascal to discuss his disillusionment with Western foreign policy and Australia's dependence on the United States. They examine media narratives, military ethics, war powers and the gap between proclaimed values and government actions. Leckie argues that American imperial commitments increasingly exceed available resources, raising questions about AUKUS and regional security. The conversation explores Australia's relationship with China and its Asian neighbours, and the prospects for a more independent, peaceful foreign policy ahead. Cameron's Links: X: https://x.com/leckie_cameron Substack: https://substack.com /@cameronleckie Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack. com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Cameron Leckie: from army officer to critic 06:29 Media narratives and declining public trust 15:53 Australia's identity and the rise of Asia 23:49 Think tanks and the China threat narrative 26:42 Military ethics, illegal orders and war powers 38:15 Gaza and Australia's foreign policy contradictions 42:34 Imperial decline, US bases and AUKUS 51:09 A different security future for the Pacific

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, we're joined for the first time by Cameron Leckie, a former major in the Australian Defence Force and a fierce critic of the US empire. Cameron, welcome.

#Cameron Leckie

Thanks very much for the invite, Pascal. I have admired your work for several years now, and in particular the seminar you ran in Japan a week or two back. I've watched a fair few of those videos, and they're quite enlightening. I imagine it would have been a great event to have so many like-minded people present. Thank you very much.

#Pascal

It was fascinating over there, but luckily we can now share all of that online as well and have many more people participate and chime in on the discussion. That’s why I wanted to invite you on, since you’re also a good friend of Dr. Warwick Powell, and you’ve written and worked quite a bit on what you see as the development and decay of US imperial forces around the world. Can you maybe walk us through that? Maybe tell us a little bit about your own experience, you know, having been part of the Australian Defence Force, why you left, and how you see this relationship between Australia and the US working out now in 2026.

#Cameron Leckie

Sure. So, yeah, I joined the Australian Army straight out of high school. I was, you know, 17, 17 and a half. I went to officer training at the Australian Defence Force Academy and the Royal Military College, Duntroon. All I ever wanted to do was join the Army. My father was conscripted during the Vietnam era. My grandfather fought in World War II, and my great-grandfather fought in the First World War. So, you know, that's all I ever wanted to do. Now, we have a lot of mythology in Australia about the Anzacs and the Anzac legend, and I guess I was fully consumed with that.

And I believed in what we were doing. We spoke about democracy and freedom and a fair go, the battler and that sort of rhetoric. I sort of believed that. And so, yeah, I became an officer and did a couple of deployments. I went to East Timor in 1999, and I actually think we did the right thing going to East Timor. I went to the Solomon Islands after some trouble there in the early 2000s, and I also went to Sumatra—a couple of trips to Banda Aceh after the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004. So, a few parts of the world. I guess I probably started questioning what we were doing with the Iraq War.

I didn't go to Iraq, but, you know, there was a difference between what we said we were going for—weapons of mass destruction—and then not finding any weapons of mass destruction. And I sort of started to question, like, well, hang on, we're supposedly doing this for good reasons, yet the whole purpose of the war was based on a lie. That was the conclusion I came to. So you start to question why we're doing what we're doing. We had the long war in Afghanistan, another example where we justified being there to support women's rights, et cetera, in a country where—how many wedding parties did the US bomb? Dozens of them over the years.

I think things started to come to a head for me. It's quite a difficult process because you're in an organisation which is, you know, going in a certain direction, and we tell ourselves, you know, we're the good guys and, you know, we follow the laws of armed conflict and the UN Charter, and all that's important. But then you see that our foreign policy and decisions don't align with that. I guess what happened in Ukraine in 2014 really was probably a turning point, particularly when MH17 was shot down. I think there were 38 Australians killed on MH17, so there was a massive reaction in Australia domestically.

And it's definitely a little bit over the top as far as the attribution of blame. I've served in an artillery regiment for a couple of years, so I do have a rudimentary understanding of how artillery and air

defence work. And the story we're supposed to believe about the Russians driving a missile launcher halfway across Russia to fire a missile and then just popping back to Russia—it just didn't seem to stack up to me, particularly when Ukraine had the means, motive and opportunity to actually down MH17. So that started sowing seeds of doubt, and I started reading more widely, listening to people like Stephen F. Cohen.

And yeah, I guess my perception of what we were doing and what we stood for changed significantly. And I guess a few other things along the way, such as what happened in Libya, the whole Skripal affair in the UK—all these things started to build a picture in my head that what we in the West were saying we were doing and what we were actually doing were two very divergent things. It came to the point where I thought serving in the Australian Defence Force was not really serving Australia's interests. It was more serving the interests of the US empire. By the time I'd come to that point, well, you really need to move on because it's not really the place to be.

#Pascal

Thank you very much. You just walked us through a lot of instances, right, that many of us have experienced or have living memory of. On the one hand, you would say, yeah, if all of those reasons were actually true, then it would be a worthy cause. But there were so many lies intertwined with all of these things that you really do wonder, you know, was it an attempt at brainwashing people, or was it just pure power projection onto the population? How do you explain to yourself that so many people, yourself included, went along with this for such a long time, believing in the overall trajectory of where things were going? I mean, for the longest time, I believe the discourse was, yeah, we made mistakes, but overall, it's the right direction, right? You zig and you zag, but overall, this was the important thing to do. And I think that consensus is now crumbling, isn't it?

#Cameron Leckie

It certainly is. And I think the media is an easy example to demonstrate that. I think back to what happened in Douma in 2018, the alleged chemical weapons attack. Well, there was an attack, and people died. I followed that quite closely. I wrote a couple of articles in a public policy journal in Australia called Pearls and Irritations. And it seemed to me—and I'm not saying I know exactly what happened—that the official narrative of the Syrian government's culpability for it just didn't seem right to me.

And one of the examples that sort of triggered it was when the whistleblowers from the OPCW came out—and Aaron Maté did a lot of good investigative reporting on this—and basically said that the report they had submitted was doctored and changed to make it look like the Syrian government was responsible for that attack, even though the evidence didn't support that. There was complete silence in the Australian media on that. And that, to me, was a trigger because, to me, this is newsworthy. Like, there's an international institution that, through whatever mechanisms, has changed the findings reported by scientists who've been on the ground to suit a narrative.

To me, that is something that should be newsworthy. But there's complete silence in the Australian media and, I think, most Western mainstream media on it. And I think that's when it finally clicked for me that this wasn't an accident. For a period of time, I thought, you know, it's just that people aren't getting the information, and as a result, they're forming conclusions based on false information. But that, I think, was the straw that broke the camel's back. These narratives are actually being managed, you know, no doubt by our intelligence and security services in conjunction with the media, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

#Pascal

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#Cameron Leckie

See you there. And once I got to that point, it's like, this is being done deliberately. And so then you start looking at everything else that you're aware of, and you think, well, if one event like that's being done deliberately, what about everything else? And yeah, I firmly believe that many of the narratives that we have been led to believe have been deliberately crafted and reinforced over decades. And that's part of the problem. You see it occur all the time, where an allegation of Russia doing something, or China doing something, or Iran doing something—the allegation becomes a fact and then gets used time and time again as evidence of their malfeasance, even though that may not actually be the case. The allegation that's made might not actually be true.

#Pascal

I mean, the most interesting thing to me is, of course, that we have this long, long history that has been researched and is well documented. And the Gulf of Tonkin incident is really only one example, right? But there are so, so many cases where these clearly fabricated pretexts were used to start wars. And decades later, we find out it was a pretext, it was a lie, it was fabricated. But when the new lie arrives, somehow, we in the West are more than willing to jump at it again and ignore that history. We just excuse it as the mistakes of past administrations—but certainly not this time. Currently, one of the incidents that is not discussed but still fuels a lot of the hate toward the Russians, especially in Europe, is Bucha.

And Bucha has all the hallmarks of something extremely fabricated. It has all the signs of another one of those Syrian gas attack kinds of incidents, because the people accused of doing it are the ones who are screaming the loudest that we need an independent UN fact-finding mission, and the other side stonewalls all of that, right? I mean, the Russians are saying, "We didn't do that. That was not on us. This is on you guys." But the Ukrainian and Western side is saying, "No, we cannot

investigate this independently. No, you need to accept what we are giving you here, and anything else is now going to be branded as a conspiracy theory." Why do you think there is this propensity in the West to believe the current lie or to run after it?

#Cameron Leckie

While at the same time accepting that the previous ones—yeah, yeah, fine, those were lies. I think it comes back to—I mean, I've never been a journalist, and I don't think I could be a journalist, at least for a mainstream organization. But, you know, it's almost like when it comes to our side—I mean, you know, the West or Western actions—all skepticism is dropped. So when a claim is made, all skepticism is dropped. And I guess the reason why they drop any skepticism is that if you did have skepticism, these narratives would evaporate in very, very short order, which is pretty scary, because you look at how much damage is done based on lies, you know, with Ukraine obviously being one example. As in, the war could have ended.

If journalists had had appropriate skepticism and held power accountable—which, when I was growing up, at least, I thought was the role of the media—the whole narrative about Ukraine would have changed, and there would have been immense pressure on the US, NATO, and the European Union to end the war. So I think a lack of skepticism is at the core of it. And I think a lot of it also comes down to, you know, people go along to get along. You know, people have lives, they've got mortgages, commitments, you know, there's career progression. And if you don't rock the boat too much, you know, you can do quite well.

Was it Upton Sinclair who said it's very difficult to get a person to understand something when their paycheck depends on them not understanding it? So I think there's a lot of that. There's a lack of scepticism. There's that go-along-to-get-along side of it. But there's someone behind the scenes. You know, we can guess, but maybe in 50 or 100 years, when all the archives are opened, I think it will become apparent who's actually been pulling the strings in all of these cases. You know, we can point to Western intelligence agencies, but how much of that was direct?

Have these narratives actually stemmed directly from the intelligence agencies, separate from their governments, or from the governments themselves? I think that's a story that will unfold. It'll take many decades, with much death and destruction in the interim, before we understand that. I do, however, think they've overplayed their hand. I think, you know, you look at the lack of trust among Western populations in both the media and their governments, particularly on Twitter. I think on other platforms, maybe not so much, but as soon as an event happens, there's a whole bunch of people, you know, calling it a false flag or asking the hard questions. So I think, you know, they're reaching a point where this approach is becoming less and less successful. And that's, I think, why we're seeing some of these authoritarian tendencies in our so-called democracies.

#Pascal

I agree with you, and I do think that they overplayed their hand. It is just too blatant and too obvious by now, and we have too many of these examples in living memory for everybody to ignore them. So voices like yours, mine, and others are slowly but surely coming through. What do you think this does, then, to the system of power that has been built, right? And I guess we agree that the imperial core is, of course, in the United States—in Washington and Wall Street, the military-industrial complex, maybe the different lobbies that there are, and so on.

And from there, it radiates out. And then you've got entire networks, elite networks that are now part and parcel of the think tank industrial complex, that actually branch out into all of these outposts of the West, of which Australia is one. But especially in Australia, I would suppose that just the geographical location should have an impact on the local perception of vulnerability and threats and what makes you secure. Do you think that in Australia now, this realization about all of these blatant lies that were fed to people, together with being far away, is leading to a change in public perception?

#Cameron Leckie

Yeah, I think Australia's an interesting case. We had First Nations people here for something like 60,000 years before Europeans arrived, and then a European colony was implanted from the other side of the world in Asia. And that sort of settlement pattern has driven so much of Australia's direction in the world, and also a sense of insecurity and a fear of Asia. It's only about 50 years ago that we finally got rid of the White Australia policy. I think you might have spoken a little bit with Geoff Rich about this the other day. You know, it's not that long ago that we embraced multiculturalism, and I think it's brought enormous, tremendous benefits to Australia over the decades. And certainly, if we didn't have immigrants from all over the world, our country would fall apart—our schools, our health system.

I live on a piece of land in the Lockyer Valley in Queensland, which is a big vegetable-growing region. Without immigrants, all those vegetables would be rotting in the ground. So Australia is very, very dependent on immigrants, but we still have this underlying tension, a lack of confidence in ourselves, being geographically in Asia but still having a population predominantly of European heritage, you know? And I think the more conservative, older white population probably dominates the debate on these matters. But I do think this is changing. I guess this might be a good segue to step back a bit and look at, you know, where we are in world history.

So I've got, you know, Ian Morris's book, Why the West Rules—for Now. You know, it tracks human history back over, I think, maybe 10,000 years. And if we just look at the last 2,000 years, the Eastern world has been the most powerful in the world for most of that time, with the exception of the last 300 years, in the age of colonialism and the age of imperialism. And I think what we're seeing is that power is going back to the East. So, with the rise of China, Eurasia, India, et cetera, I

think we're seeing that transition back to the East being the most dominant. And I think a lot of the panic—"panic" may be overstating it—but certainly a lot of quite irrational arguments in this country are about, you know, why we still need to have the US empire.

I think a lot of that comes back to an inability to deal with a changing world. So we're trying to cling on to that European-hegemonic, US-hegemonic world system, what we call in Australia the rules-based global order, which is really just a euphemism for the US empire. We're trying as hard as we can to cling on to that, even though, I guess, it's like trying to hold back the tide. I mean, the West could destroy the world through nuclear war, et cetera. The East has no reason to do that because they're obviously on the up. So I think we have this tension between an inability to accept that the balance of power in the world is changing, our geographical position in the world, and the mostly European population that we have in this country.

#Pascal

But overall, I mean, what is your perception? Shouldn't there be a strong drive inside Australia to also just seek more interaction with its immediate neighborhood—Indonesia, Malaysia, Asia in general, and of course, China? I mean, they are much, much closer than the good old Brits over there, the Europeans, and the North Americans. And also, if I remember correctly, immigration from Asia is right now at an all-time high, right? So isn't that creating these new links for Australia to kind of find its place in a world after US and Western hegemony?

#Cameron Leckie

It certainly is. There's, I guess, a tension between the security establishment and business and culture. You know, you go pretty much anywhere in Australia and you'll see people from all over the world. We're very much multicultural. And I can compare it with when I went to school in country Victoria, in the southern part of Australia. I can't really remember seeing anyone who wasn't Anglo-Saxon. There were a few Aboriginal First Nations kids in my school, but I'd say 95 to 98 percent of students all looked, you know, something like me. You wouldn't find that anywhere in Australia now. Even when you go into regional and rural areas, there are people of ethnicities from all over the world. So, you know, we're a fully multicultural nation.

And this is, I think, you know, if you look at the background of most people in positions of power in our security establishment, they're very much predominantly from an Anglo-Saxon background. So I think that dominance is almost like a retrograde action, like we're hanging on by our fingernails, hoping that the Western-dominated global system will remain. But time is moving on. And, you know, this is one of the things I just find quite interesting about the reticence to embrace Asia.

Like, as a resource-rich country and a big agricultural producer, right at the heart of the Eurasian part of the world, we could certainly continue to grow our prosperity, as we're currently doing. And it makes a lot of sense, when you're growing your prosperity, to also align your security institutions

and architecture with those economic ties. At the moment, we have this quite amazing situation where the major source of our prosperity, China, is also perceived as our greatest threat.

#Pascal

It is quite schizophrenic, right? But this schizophrenia actually is not unique to Australia. I mean, a lot of this is true for a lot of countries. The country I'm in right now, Japan, has an economy that's heavily dependent on China. Yet, together with North Korea, China is perceived as one of the great threats. Some people throw Russia in there as well, although I must say, I haven't met anyone in Japan who's seriously scared of Russia. It's really more China and North Korea.

And North Korea, I kind of understand because, again, there are no economic links. And there's a guy with a nuclear weapon there who says, like, "We would incinerate Tokyo." So I do understand that fear. But the fear of China is a really bizarre one because if there is a country that has no history of going thousands of kilometers abroad in order to try to conquer other island nations, it is probably China. The last Chinese who tried were actually Mongols, not Chinese. Can you explain this to yourself other than through the prism of racial replacement anxiety, or however you want to look at that?

#Cameron Leckie

Yeah, there's an organisation called the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, ASPI. You might have heard of them, but they're a defence think tank. It's partly funded by the Australian government, but they also seek funding from elsewhere. And you can guess some of those funders: the military-industrial complex in the US and, I think, the UK as well. And some of their project work, such as on the Uyghurs in China, has been funded by the governments of the United Kingdom, the United States, and, I believe, Taiwan as well.

But this is, you know, what a lot of people call the Australian Sinophobia Institute, or things like that. They are very, very, very anti-China. Now, supposedly, the institute itself publishes the work of its staff and authors but doesn't have a position per se. That's the rhetoric they use, I believe. But if you look at what they publish, it's all "China, China, China is the threat." They're essentially the salespeople for the military-industrial complex in Australia. And you can see I've sort of stolen that from Will Shriver.

You might have come across him on Twitter. He uses the term “empire evangelists,” and I very much believe that people of that ilk are fully committed to the imperial project of, you know, Western hegemony. And unfortunately, I'm not sure how influential they are. They certainly get a lot of airplay in our major national newspapers and news organisations. But, yeah, it is quite amazing how they must be able to split their brain in half when they write some of these articles. So, for example, you know, who's the only country in the world to blow up a gas pipeline underwater? The United States.

They won't mention that, but they'll, you know, raise the prospect of China doing similar things to optical fibre cables or something like that. So they're very good at, you know, projecting a threat while not even downplaying but totally ignoring our own actions. So, yeah, I think institutions such as this are losing their credibility over time because, as I've said a few times, the closer the empire comes to collapse, the more propaganda increases on a parabolic curve, and it's becoming more and more blatant. So they quite often get quite a shellacking, at least on social media, but also from some serious academics, over the quality of the analysis that they produce.

#Pascal

Let's shift gears a bit and talk about this from the point of view of your military background. One of the things that is fascinating to me, as somebody who also studies international law, among other things, is that nations—modern nation-states—tend to educate their soldiers pretty well on the laws of war and peace. You referred to them earlier. I mean, military manuals are a very, very important source, actually, for deducing what kinds of rules of engagement and so on are accepted and whatnot. Yet, when it comes to the big questions of going to war or not, we find that military institutions are often at the whim of political decisions. Did you find that in Australia as well? Were some of the foreign deployments that you were forced into also in line with what the military leadership wanted? Or is it politics that drives these deployments? Or, on the contrary, is it the networks between the different militaries of the West that also decide quite a bit of what Australia participates in and what...

#Cameron Leckie

Supposedly, in Australia, we have a separation between the military and our political system, which is as it should be. So the military should act at the direction of the government of the day. And if you had asked me that when I started, or probably during the first half of my military career, I would have said that that's what I believed. I'm not so sure now. I mean, it's only intuition, I guess, as you observe things around the world, but you wonder how much influence our intelligence services in particular, but also our military, have on government decision-making. So I guess if we talk about the laws of armed conflict, every soldier or member of the Australian Defence Force is trained right from day one, you know, in their initial recruit training. They're trained in the laws of armed conflict.

And that progresses throughout your military career. I can only really speak to the Army, but I was actually an instructor on what was called the Grade 2 Officer Course at a place called Canungra for four years, and I was the package master for the laws of armed conflict package. So it was a six-week course, and we spent a couple of days of that focusing on, you know, the laws of armed conflict. And they're also incorporated into the training scenarios that we run.

And, you know, when it comes to understanding those laws of armed conflict, there's no excuse for any person in the military not to understand them, because they're drummed into you from day one. You do regular refresher training, and then, before deployment, you're thoroughly briefed by legal

officers on what the rules of engagement are and how they relate to the laws of armed conflict. So, you know, I think there's a pretty good system in the military. And it's also drummed into us that following an illegal order is not an excuse.

So the old Nuremberg defense: "I was only following orders." People are also made well aware of that. So if you can't engage someone because of the rules of engagement, and you do and you kill someone, you can be held accountable for a war crime. So people are well aware of that. I did not deploy to Iraq, but I did do some of the pre-deployment training for that. There wouldn't have been a single Australian soldier, in my view, who deployed to Iraq thinking that what they were embarking on was a war of aggression, which is what I view the war in Iraq as—a war of aggression.

But the way the political system sells it, and then it comes down through the hierarchy of defence, we still have all those rules of engagement, etc. I don't think there'd be a single Australian soldier who deployed to Iraq who would have doubted the legality of what they were doing. So it's only in hindsight that, you know, you come to a realisation that the war was based on a lie. They've created a narrative and, you know, backed that up with our political system and the system that creates all the orders and that within the Defence Force.

You know, it's quite interesting how we can achieve that—how what, in hindsight, was clearly a war of aggression can be legitimised at the time as something where you're just following orders, and those orders are lawful, so there's no reason for you not to be doing what you're doing. And I guess in Australia, we didn't have a lot of reflection about our involvement in the war in Iraq. But I am a member of a group called Australians for War Powers Reform, which was formed out of the war in Iraq and called for an inquiry like the Chilcot Inquiry in the UK. And I guess our position is that the decision to go to war overseas is the most important decision that a government can make.

So our view is that Parliament should vote on that, so Parliament takes responsibility for that decision and not the Prime Minister, because currently the Prime Minister is the only person who can, on their own, make that decision. So I think that's fundamentally undemocratic, and that lack of political oversight can lead, as we saw in Iraq, to Australian Defence Force personnel being deployed on operations which, you know, if we're honest about it, are illegal. And I don't think that's a tenable position for any person in the Defence Force to be put in.

#Pascal

What would happen if an officer in the Australian Defence Force was ordered to go abroad on a mission and they refused on the grounds of what you just said? Like, "Oh, no, this is a war of aggression. Wars of aggression are illegal, therefore I must refuse this order." What are the legal consequences for somebody doing that?

#Cameron Leckie

Yeah, it's a good question, and I'm not 100% sure. The military is the ultimate bureaucracy, so we have a thing called the Defence Force Discipline Act, which can be used to punish people if they don't do as they're told. Australian soldiers and members of the Defence Force are all volunteers. So, you know, we don't have conscription in Australia. We did during the Vietnam War, but that's well and truly ended. So pretty much, you know, everyone who goes on a deployment, realistically, is a volunteer.

If you didn't want to go, you'd put your hand up. I'm not aware of anyone who's done it, but if you looked like you were going to kick up a stink, I think they'd take you off a deployment before you got there, because it's the easiest way to manage that. You know, imagine if you had people start putting their hands up, saying, "I'm not going to deploy. I think this is illegal." That creates a bit of an issue for Defence. So I think the easiest way would be to just take people off the deployment. But you'd be caught—I mean, I felt the same. I remember when I got told I was going to East Timor, I was over the moon. I was so excited because you've done all this training for, you know, X number of years, and you're going to go and do what you joined the military to do. It wasn't a war, but, you know, it was overseas service, and there was some danger involved.

And I think most Australian soldiers, when they deploy—and probably soldiers in many places around the world—are actually, you know, looking forward to it. It's like a doctor who's never got to perform surgery before. You know, what was the point of all that training? So you have that inherent enthusiasm, and then, you know, the way the Defence Force works, they sell what you're doing. So, as I said before, at least in previous years, like in the Iraq War and Afghanistan, there would have been no one deploying thinking that, you know, they were going to do something illegal. So you tee those two things up, and people are quite enthusiastic.

But if you were that person who put your hand up—and I guess this is, at the end of the day, why I left, because I didn't want to get to that position where I had to go and deploy and do something which I fundamentally disagreed with—you know, you're taking quite a big personal reputational risk there because I guess you're bucking the system. And the people who buck the system, you know, typically get frowned upon. And so, yeah, especially if you've been around a while, you've put your life and soul into an organization, then you're saying, "No, I'm not going to do this," for moral reasons, or because you think it's illegal or whatever. You know, your personal reputation would suffer. And, you know, at the end of the day, you're looking for another job. So I think in the current circumstances, you know, it's really mostly a reputational issue.

But it would be interesting if we'd fought in a conventional war like what's happening in Ukraine, because Australia hasn't actually fought in one, really, since the Second World War. I think we had about 40,000 people killed in World War Two, which, as a proportion of the population, is quite large. But with most of the deployments we've had, you know, since the Korean War, there's been a fair chance you're going to come home. Yes, we lost people killed and wounded, but the majority of

Australians came home. But it'd be interesting to see, if we were going to fight a significant war where your chances of being killed were great, as in what's happening in Ukraine, what impact that would have on people's enthusiasm to deploy to war. I guess I'm hoping we never get to that point.

#Pascal

I mean, especially if you cannot identify with that place, right? Again, Australia is far away. It's far away from Iran, but somehow manages to convince a lot of people that it needs to identify with the struggle against Iran, right?

#Cameron Leckie

And that's one of the odd things about the military. It's like, you know, the government can say tomorrow that—pick a country—it's your enemy. And all of a sudden, if you're a member of the Defence Force, you could be fighting a country you know nothing about for a cause you probably know very little about. And they're all of a sudden your enemy. Yeah, it's quite an odd thing. I mean, that's how the military works, but it is quite an odd thing, particularly for an Australian, that the government decrees someone to be an enemy and you can theoretically be fighting them in short order, even though you know nothing about them.

#Pascal

And what does this do to you, given your military training and also your knowledge of the laws of armed conflict, when you look at the horrors in Gaza and the way that another white settler colony is treating its Indigenous people? Because, I mean, Australia is grappling quite a bit with how it treated its own Indigenous people, its First Nations peoples. Does this actually influence Australians' perception of how things are being run now in the US empire? I mean, what's happening with the Palestinians?

#Cameron Leckie

Yeah. So, I guess there are so many things in the world we look at. You know, we focus on single events, such as the genocide in Gaza or the war in Ukraine, and some have had greater effects than others. And I think what's happening in Gaza has been—I don't think it would be too strong a word to say—transformational in how many Australians view the world. Now, that being said, there are still a lot of people who are supporters of Israel or, you know, take the view that Israel was attacked by Hamas, so therefore Israel needs to do what it can do. But I think there's a large proportion of Australians who are aghast at what's occurred and is occurring, and I'm one of those.

Yeah, I mean, I actually wrote an article for Pearls and Irritations, which I mentioned before, and I started off saying, "Sometimes I wake up and don't recognise the country that I live in," you know? Australia is one of the countries that helped set up the UN and, I think, one of the first countries to

sign up to the Genocide Convention. And it just blows my mind that a country that speaks so much about human rights is actually complicit in the genocide. There's a website called Declassified. An experienced journalist, Peter Cronau, has written many articles for them, basically highlighting how weapons or parts for the F-35 aircraft leave Australia and fly directly to Israel.

And I'm not a lawyer, but that to me says, you know, these planes can't fly without these parts, obviously. And if you're sending them from your country to a country you know is committing, or at the very least is at risk of committing, genocide, and you've signed up to the Genocide Convention, and it's actually included in your domestic law that complicity in genocide is a crime, it just blows my mind how a government can allow that to happen. And lots and lots of people in Australia can see that. And I think it was last year that something like 300,000 people marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in protest against the genocide.

So, yeah, I think this event has probably opened a lot of people's eyes in Australia as to, you know, what we are doing as a nation. For me, it started back in Ukraine and was then cemented by what happened in Douma in 2018. But each time events like this happen, more and more people have their eyes opened to, you know, how our power systems work and what this country is actually doing compared to the lofty rhetoric we hear from our political class. And that divergence between what we say we are and what we're doing is not sustainable over the long term.

#Pascal

So as horrible and heartbreaking as these events are, at the same time, they are, as you said, transformational. It's going to be too many people, too many people at the same time realizing that, oh no, wait a second, maybe we're the baddies. Maybe we're the ones who caused this killing and suffering and slaughter and all of these things that we said we don't want anymore under the UN Human Rights Convention and so on. So how do you see it unraveling, this Western empire?

#Cameron Leckie

I mean, I've only met Warwick in the last few years, and I had quite an interest in oil and energy in the early 2000s. And this is why I'm as confident as I can be that the U.S. empire is on the decline. It basically comes back to the work of Joseph Tainter and the collapse of complex societies. Basically, the return on investment in empire for the U.S. has long been negative. What does that mean? That means that for every one of these misadventures, whether it's the war in Ukraine, what's happening in Iran, or a potential conflict with China, the U.S. is not gaining anything out of that these days. It's a net cost.

If you go back to, I think it was 1848—and I'm not going to embarrass myself by trying to name the treaty—but the treaty that the U.S. had with Mexico, where basically they took over, you know, large parts of the southwest of the North American continent, that was an enormous return on investment. For a little bit of blood and a little bit of cash, they took over all that area and all the

agriculture, all the oil, all the gold, et cetera. So, a massive return on investment. And you can think about the Caribbean and the Philippines, et cetera—a big return on investment compared to how much it cost them. But really, I think probably the end of the Second World War was the last time that return on investment was positive.

Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan—you know, what did the U.S. gain? Now, the military-industrial complex, yeah, they might have gained. U.S. society as a whole has not gained. And that's why you see the living standards of the average American going backwards. So, you know, that is what is driving this. And there's no escaping it once an empire gets to this stage, where its commitments outweigh its resources. It's inevitable that it'll contract. So over the longer term, there's no avoiding this. And I think we're starting to see, with a few helping hands, like the Iranians destroying many of the bases in the Persian Gulf, that the U.S. will start to physically contract.

Its imperial footprint will contract. And I think, you know, that's the big picture. How specifically is it going to unfold? Well, you know, we're seeing that now, but we can't really predict that because there are so many factors in play. And particularly when we get someone like President Trump, who is prone to act, you know, in ways that we might think are irrational, such as attacking Iran. So there's going to be lots of bumps along the way, and there'll be lots of efforts to sustain the empire. But I think, as Warwick describes it, it's an autoimmune response. The empire's so far down the sort of decline-and-collapse path now that everything it tries to do actually worsens its own situation.

So in many ways, when I think about Australia over the next couple of years, we might almost be at the point, or just past the point, where the most dangerous phase is over. I think the American imperial class is sort of realising it's well over its skis and, you know, taking on China at this point in time would result in a much bigger failure than what's occurred in Iran. I guess the thing that does scare me a bit is that sort of evangelical view of the world where, you know, they might destroy everything rather than accept a world where the empire doesn't dominate.

#Pascal

Yeah, that is one of the dangers. But I was asking myself that question: what would I need to see to believe that the United States had actually changed course? Because so far, with everything we see, we are still caught up in this question that Brian Berletic and others also ask: is what Donald Trump does really part of a rethinking of U.S. foreign policy, right? Is he saying, "We know we live in a multipolar world"? I mean, this was Rubio's speech one and a half years ago: "Multipolarity is here, and we are just the Western Hemisphere," and so on. Or is it still just make-believe, and the long-term planning in the U.S. is actually still about pursuing hegemony and saying, "No, no, we just need to sow enough chaos," and so on?

And the Iran war, we can use that in order to weaken China or to slow its growth, thereby winning against this power over the next 25 to 45 years and weakening it strategically in order to still exercise dominance. At the moment, I don't think we can settle that question. But I was wondering,

what would it take for me to finally say, "Okay, something has seriously changed, something has seriously cracked"? For instance, if the Americans actually told the Japanese, "Look, we're leaving Yokosuka. We're leaving all of the bases over here. We're going to go back home. No American soldier will remain in Japan." If that ever happened, I would say, "Okay, now they're serious," because they wouldn't be withdrawing for any bilateral reason involving Japan, but for their own unilateral reasons. What would it take for you to finally settle the question and say, "Okay, the empire is changing its course"?

#Cameron Leckie

Yeah, that's probably the question of the time, isn't it? I mean, we can speculate. From an Australian perspective, if the numerous U.S. bases—which we don't label as U.S. bases because that's politically sensitive—if they... What was that, sorry?

#Pascal

What are they called?

#Cameron Leckie

They're joint facilities, I think is the terminology they use. Yeah, we actually have a legal document called the Force Posture Agreement between Australia and the United States, where we've handed over our sovereignty over "agreed facilities," which include some of our military bases and airports and ports, etc. So if the U.S. were to pack up and leave, that would be an indicator. Unfortunately, we're going in the other direction, with more U.S. military bases in this country. So I think, and maybe hope, that it will be one of those things where, in 20 years' time, we'll look back and go, "Oh, the empire has sort of ended." But it'll be little bit by little bit. There'll just be a reduction. So theoretically, we might still have, you know, a U.S. facility, but there's no one there, or there's no equipment left, or it's not used, or something like that.

I think the more likely indicators are probably things that we're going to recognize in retrospect. And I think, for example, in Australia, the AUKUS deal is about submarines—well, not just submarines, but largely submarines that Australia's paying hundreds of billions for but will probably never get. And you had Hugh White, I believe, on your program some time ago, talking about, you know, the US and the UK having nuclear submarines rotate out of what they're calling Submarine Rotational Force–West, I think, which is in Western Australia. And the UK doesn't have the capacity to actually deploy its submarines. So even though, notionally, it's a base where the UK might base its submarines, in practice, that's probably highly unlikely. Or it might be a one-off, or something that occurs once every many years. And I guess, you know, maybe we'll see the same.

We have a base and, you know, a US submarine every now and then pops through and re-arms, refuels, but it will happen with increasing time between visits. So I think that's the sort of thing.

Ideally, if I was the boss for a day, I'd say, "All right, thanks very much, Uncle Sam. You can go home now." But I think it's unlikely we're going to have that sort of event. It'll just be a slow, embarrassing death. And in hindsight, we'll look back and go, "What happened? The United States is no longer here."

#Pascal

I wonder, though, what happens when the politics of the new era sets in. I mean, very interestingly, just yesterday we had the spectacle of the Saudis, the Turks, and the Pakistanis going to Tehran to discuss regional security with Iran. I mean, this is highly unexpected, but highly welcome, because it shows that the regional actors actually understand that there is no way around trying to at least discuss the outlines of new security architectures, right? Do you think that anything like this is possible in the foreseeable future, in the next couple of years, between, let's say, Australia, Japan, ASEAN, and China? That they just sit together and say, like, "Hey, how about we have a regional discussion about how we can organize stuff?"

And we don't even need to talk about, you know, high politics. It's more like what you would be engaged in, or, for instance, coast guard forces just talking to each other to say, "Hey, maybe we have a couple of holes where we don't really know how we should engage and so on, and who's responsible for what. Wouldn't it make sense if we sat together, not just at the prime minister level, but at the minister or vice minister level, to say, 'Hey, let's plug these holes'?"

#Cameron Leckie

Do you see anything like that maybe coming up? Currently, no, but that's because the current political class is very much pro-US, very much trying to regain or stabilise the status quo. I mean, the status quo is evaporating. For example, there's a lot of effort by the Australian government to have Australia in the Pacific in lieu of China. So I think Australia will probably be one of the last countries in our region to do this. But I do get the feeling that, you know, it'll be a non-linear change, or a political change brought about by an election.

We've had two parties, the Liberal Party and the Labor Party, which, you know, are chalk and cheese, really. The things they disagree on are fairly minute, but on the core things, they're pretty much the same. So they've been in power forever in Australia, since Federation—over 100 years, really. But I think there's a space opening up where we might see some alternative parties. The Greens elected a new leader in Australia, and Senator David Shoebridge has quite a different view of the world. So, you know, we could only be an election or two away, I think, from seeing a turning point for Australia, from our current trajectory to something which is more realistic in the world we live in.

And I mean, you know, you look at how many countries in our region are now members of BRICS. So, like Indonesia, which is, you know, one of our nearest neighbours, is on track to be the fourth-

or fifth-largest economy in the world within a few decades. It's got good relations with China and Russia. Australia tries to maintain good relations, but I don't know how authentic that is, as it's trying to counterbalance China as opposed to being genuine. I think that's one of the things about Australia's foreign affairs: in my view, we're not an honest broker. Pretty much everything our foreign policy does is, you know, cynical.

And I think that's an unsustainable path. So I think as events unfold and it becomes apparent that the Western world is weakening, you know, it will probably require a change in policy and a few politicians. But I think the time is coming when we could see relatively rapid change. But I'm saying we're probably still five or six years, you know, an election cycle or two, away from that point. I guess that's part of why I write so much, because I'm hoping that I'm nudging that sort of change so that we embrace the region we live in, you know, peacefully and more rapidly than we otherwise would.

#Pascal

And that is something that I support very much, because even if we speed it up just by a couple of months or maybe a couple of years, that's going to be good, because it's a step toward the future and not toward this imperial, encrusted, entrenched, and very, very violent past that we are still part and parcel of. But thank you very much, Cameron, for this very broad outline of your analysis. If people want to read more from you, where should they go?

#Cameron Leckie

I'm most active on Twitter, so it's lecky underscore Cameron. I've also got a Substack with quite a few articles on it. I don't write quite as often as I would like to, but there's quite a collection of articles there.

#Pascal

If you send me the links, then I will certainly post them in the description box below. And when something happens—and that's for sure—we will talk again about the regional security apparatus in the Pacific. Until then, Cameron Leckie, thank you so much for your time today.

#Cameron Leckie

Thank you very much, Pascal.