

The ethics of alliance

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Reflexive support for state power and violence by America's cheerleaders in Australia takes many forms.

There are *ad hominem* attacks on those who disclose Washington's nefarious secrets, such as its slaughter of journalists in Iraq or its illegal surveillance apparatus directed by the NSA. There is a conspicuous silence when US drones murder civilians in Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Currently there is confected outrage when a rival state cedes territory it considers to be a legitimate strategic asset, but convenient amnesia when questions about invasions and occupations by friends and allies are raised.

Compare the reaction to President Putin's annexation of Crimea, which has so far resulted in one fatality, with Saudi Arabia's incursion into Bahrain in 2011 which killed many innocent Shi'ites but which Washington refused to even call an "invasion". Coincidentally, just as Crimea houses the Russian Navy's Black Sea fleet, Bahrain plays host to the US Fifth Fleet.

Consider Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank, which has killed thousands of Palestinians since 1948, and dispossessed many more, but would not have been possible without Washington's connivance.

Perhaps there is a closer parallel. We are approaching the 40th anniversary of Turkey's illegal invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus. Mass expulsions of Greek Cypriots, property theft and egregious human violations including killings and unexplained disappearances, followed the initial attack in July 1974. But Ankara remains a valued NATO ally and there are no suggestions in

Washington or Canberra that economic sanctions be imposed on Prime Minister Erdoğan, his business cronies or predecessors. Some invasions and land grabs, such as Indonesia's 24 year occupation of East Timor which Canberra and Washington enabled, are just fine with us.

Hypocrisy, double standards and selective outrage dominates foreign affairs commentary. Amongst the current avalanche of hysterical Putin bashing in the Western media one fact is always omitted. The US is the most promiscuous interventionary state in the world, with mass slaughters in Afghanistan and Iraq being only the most recent examples of its addiction to military violence. In both these cases Australia was an enthusiastic accomplice.

To those infatuated by power, however, these actions - for which apologies are never issued nor reparations paid - are not crimes, merely "wrong-headed and foolhardy" because Washington's impact on the world is "benign" (Michael Fullilove) and it remains an "overwhelming force for good in the world" (Greg Sheridan, Kevin Rudd). Just ask the Vietnamese.

Perhaps the strangest claim by American boosters in Australia is that Washington is unfairly singled out for criticism by "the left" and thugs like Putin get off lightly. According to a former Liberal Party staffer, "It's interesting how little the green-left in Australia has said about Russia's conquest of Crimea which, under international law, is part of Ukraine. Had the United States done it, I think the green-left would have gone berserk." (Gerard Henderson). Actually, the alleged silence of "the left" is neither interesting nor surprising.

Despite its own significant responsibility for what has happened in Ukraine, there is no obsession with Washington's crimes in the Australian media or across the broader political class. But there should be one.

There is no alliance between Australia and Russia. We don't have intelligence sharing agreements with Moscow. There are no

technology transfers and no Russian troops rotating through Darwin. We don't play host to "joint facilities" with Russia, have routine ministerial meetings with officials in Moscow or regular bilateral summits between our heads of government. We have no influence on Moscow's political elite.

We do, however, have limited leverage in Washington. The alliance gives us access to their decision makers, regardless of whether our opinions are welcome. With that opportunity comes a responsibility to exert influence where we can, especially to curb America's propensity to meet its global political challenges with extreme violence. This does not constitute a disproportionate preoccupation with US foreign policy, as the local Washington lobby would have us believe. As our major ally that is precisely where our focus should be.

It is also our ethical duty. In democratic societies, responsibility for the consequences of our actions extends to the decisions taken by governments on our behalf because we can participate in the process of formulating policy. The US alliance is a policy choice for Australia and there is no evading the moral consequences of that relationship, including the international behaviour of "our great and powerful friend".

Our leaders closely align themselves with their counterparts in Washington, and claim to share both common values and a similar view of the world. In Iraq and Afghanistan, as in several wars before, we have been willingly complicit in acts of aggression and breaches of international law. Drawing attention to these crimes, as opposed to those committed by others we have no influence upon, does not constitute anti-Americanism. It is our moral and political responsibility. Like charity, analysis and criticism should begin at home.