

REVIEWS

Clinton Fernandes, *Subimperial Power: Australia in the International Arena*
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As tensions run high between China and the US, Australia occupies a unique position in international affairs. A long-standing and enthusiastic member of the American sphere of influence, Australia's economy is dependent on Chinese markets to fuel its own growth models. In 2022, the demands of Chinese steel production led to the purchase of 736 tonnes of Australian iron ore—80 per cent of Australia's national export, amounting to A\$124 billion in national income (\$83 billion). This mutually advantageous trading relationship has posed little obstacle thus far for Australia's ever-tightening alliance with the United States, a relationship that in 2021 culminated in the signing of the AUKUS security treaty between Australia, the UK and the US, at the heart of which is a deal to help Australia acquire a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines equipped with long-range land attack Tomahawk missiles. This and a slew of other trilateral security arrangements have been pitched as a necessary response to China's military build-up and its naval activities in the South Pacific, an argument repeated unceasingly across both benches of the Australian Parliament and in the press. Despite the far-reaching policy shifts that AUKUS heralds—the end of the country's anti-nuclear settlement, a costly escalation in militarization and a forthright policy of containing the country's main trading partner—few commentators have been willing to identify and interrogate the broader political dynamics that underpin it.

As a former military-intelligence officer, Clinton Fernandes is well placed to illuminate the mechanisms of Australian power. Born to Goanese parents in the early 1970s, he volunteered for the Australian Defence Force after school in Melbourne. He was first assigned to an infantry battalion, then spotted as 'officer material'. The Australian Intelligence Corps singled him out while still in training and Fernandes went on to work for the Signals and Intelligence Corps across a number of domains: counterintelligence, analysis, tactics, operations and a general 'watch-keeping' post. In 1998, still in his twenties, he was sent to East Timor for analytical work. There, he had a front-row seat to observe Australia's active support for Indonesia's brutal military occupation of the half-island, both of which—Jakarta's atrocities, in repressing the Timorese national-liberation forces, and Canberra's logistical and diplomatic backing for them—had been going on since 1975, after Portugal had recognized East Timor's independence. The experience was a watershed for Fernandes, who began working with Australia–East Timor solidarity activists (the book under review, like his earlier contributions, is dedicated to the memory of Andrew McNaughtan, a Sydney doctor who fought tirelessly for Timorese self-determination before his early death).

After fifteen years in the Army, with the rank of major, Fernandes switched to doctoral research at the University of New South Wales. In 2005 he published *Reluctant Saviour*, analysing the assiduous efforts by John Howard's National–Liberal government—and Australia's 'Jakarta Lobby' which, Fernandes argued, had a powerful voice within it—to block the 1998 East Timor independence ballot, even as Indonesia's ongoing massacres there were made public. In 1999, amid mounting pressure, Howard reluctantly changed tack, and the Australian media rebranded the ADF as the region's peacekeepers during the transition to independence. A regular contributor to *Arena*, the Melbourne-based new-left journal, Fernandes has published a series of regional studies: *Reluctant Indonesians* (2008) described the struggle of the West Papuans; *The Independence of East Timor* (2011) was a multi-dimensional history of the liberation struggle; *Island off the Coast of Asia* (2018) examined the drivers of Australia's foreign policy—crushing the Malayan resistance alongside the British; fighting with the US in Korea and Vietnam; backing the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia.

His latest work, *Subimperial Power*, is the most theoretical to date. Its aim is to define Australia's structural location within the inter-state system. The conventional description of the country as a 'middle power', Fernandes argues, offers little explanation, neither for Australia's unique economic configuration nor the patterns of its military-force projection—nor, indeed, the domestic political structures that enable these. To define its role as 'upholding a rules-based international order', to ensure its own prosperity and security, merely begs the question of what that order is. For Fernandes,

quite straightforwardly, it is the American-led imperial system—‘imperial’ in the sense defined by the former UN assistant secretary-general and political scientist Michael Doyle in *Empires* (1986): ‘a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of others.’ Control, Fernandes emphasizes, requires neither occupation nor annexation; it may just as effectively operate through economic, political or cultural dependence, through the threat of force as much as the use of it. What then is Australia’s role within this structure—and why is the domestic political establishment so keen on ‘upholding’ it?

For Fernandes, Australia has long sought to align itself with imperial power, a strategic reflex that has its origins in its peculiar status as a British possession. By 1770, when James Cook sailed up the eastern coast of the continent and claimed it for the Crown, Britain had already battled its way to supremacy over the seas, defeating its old enemy, France, in the Seven Years’ War. The British East India Company was presiding over its largest-yet famine in Bengal, thanks in part to the rice requisitioned for its troops and their dependents. The British Parliament, nearly a quarter of whose members held East India Company stock, backed it with vast sums for naval and military operations to protect its acquisitions; the Company began exporting Indian opium to China that same year. For Whitehall strategists, Australasian settlement provided the chance to establish an intermediary base for its activities in India and China. New Zealand had plentiful timber and flax, useful for shipbuilding. A naval base could also interdict wartime French, Dutch and Spanish communications across the archipelagos of the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

In this sense, the Australian colonies were never just dumping grounds for Britain’s surplus population, though convicts did provide useful labour. Nor were they simply territories to be subjected to colonial extraction and exploitation. They were, Fernandes makes clear, important outposts of empire. The British authorities supplied the Australian settlers with rice, semolina, lentils, clothing, livestock and seeds from Bengal; by the 1840s, two ships a week were ploughing the route from Calcutta. The colonies flourished under the umbrella of British imperial power and Australia was the largest recipient of British foreign investment in the 1870s and 80s, benefiting from the immense drain of wealth from India. By the 1890s, Australia was beginning to flex its own muscles in the South Pacific, projecting its economic power over Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The Sydney-based Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) benefited from labour imported from India on long-term indenture ‘contracts’. In this sense, Fernandes notes, Australia’s national formation had a ‘subimperial’ dimension from the start—‘subordinate to the imperial centre, but able to project considerable power and influence in its own region’.

The national-security structures, developed after the six colonies federated as the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, were premised not on the basis of national defence—for the country faced no serious adversaries—but with a view to supporting the British Empire, which guaranteed Australia's economic interests even as it reinforced its 'subimperial' identity. Culturally, the country saw itself as part of the multi-continental 'Greater Britain' comprised of Anglophone settler colonies around the world, defending the Empire against growing competition. This was fortified by belief in its essential benevolence, along the lines laid out by J. S. Mill in 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention', after the crushing of the 1857 Indian Revolt—Britain acting 'rather in the service of others, than of itself', even when 'the aggressions of barbarians force it to successful war.' The organizing principle of Australian foreign policy was to be 'on the winning side' in the worldwide confrontation between the Empire and the lands it dominated. To the country's strategists, 'for the Empire to be strong anywhere, it needed to be strong everywhere', as the country's official military historian Craig Stockings notes. Nearly half a million Australian troops enlisted to fight for Britain in the First World War, as Prime Minister Joseph Cook declared that 'all our resources in Australia are in the Empire—and for the Empire'.

After 1945, Australia adapted smoothly to a subordinate role in the American-led world order, becoming an eager, if anxious, junior partner. Stories of easy Australian–American 'mateship' were strictly for public consumption; striving for US attention, the country's policy makers were well aware that they occupied a negligible place in Washington's world view. Their main objective was to win the recognition and approval of American officials, Fernandes argues; military outcomes were less important than 'having senior US figures visit the Australian area of operations and appreciate its contribution'. This fundamental outlook helps explain why Australia took the colonizers' side in the national-liberation struggles in East and Southeast Asia, pouring troops into the US wars against Korea and Vietnam. Similarly, Australia's planners counted its forces' role in Afghanistan—and, more quietly, in Iraq—a success because the national flag was flying alongside the Stars and Stripes.

This military subimperialism, for Fernandes, is echoed in Australia's position in the world economy. The structures set in place under British rule fostered monocultural exports from the six colonies, with vertical ties between each of them and London, rather than horizontal integration across the continent. Upholding the Empire meant defending the rights of its London-based private investors; even after Federation in 1901, the nation's new Constitution explicitly protected British access to Australian markets, effectively shielding its investors from decisions made in Australia's Parliament. That pattern proved enduring. For a wealthy

country, Australia has remained remarkably underdeveloped. Its level of economic complexity is the lowest in the OECD, an anomaly among advanced economies—according to the government’s chief economist in 2018, closer to that of a developing country like Kazakhstan, Cambodia, Kenya or Saudi Arabia. Its exports remain highly specialized: iron ore (above all for China), coal briquettes, gold, petroleum gas and wheat. If primary exports underwrite Australian growth, Fernandes stresses that the biggest conglomerates in these sectors are largely American-owned: BHP is 71 per cent owned by US-based investors; Rio Tinto, 77 per cent; and Woodside Petroleum, 63 per cent. Their interests lie in ‘an integrated global economy that offers a benign environment for international investors’, in Fernandes’s words. Outcrops of export manufacturing turn out to be links in global value chains—Boeing components sent to the US, for example, or GM auto parts to South Korea.

The peculiar weaknesses built into Australia’s Constitution, effectively excluding the courts and Parliament from national-security policy, help to buttress its subimperial role. There is no Australian equivalent of the 1973 US War Powers Resolution, which sets legal limits on the American President’s freedom to order military action; the Australian Prime Minister can send the ADF on expeditionary operations overseas without any parliamentary authorization or even debate. Since 9/11, the Intelligence Services Act has further curtailed Parliament’s powers, removing the intelligence agencies’ actual methods and operations from its purview and allowing it to legislate only on their financing and administration. Similarly, there is no parliamentary oversight of, or even access to, the US spy centre at Pine Gap near Alice Springs. Established by the CIA in the 1960s on Arrernte lands to monitor Soviet military activity, Pine Gap remains shrouded in secrecy; government officials have at times referred to it as a space-research facility or a system for nuclear deterrence. Its aerials pick up information relayed by US satellites, which use heat detection to track aircraft, missiles, drones and space vehicles, as well as intercepting military and civilian communications, integrating Australia into the US war machine, as Fernandes puts it. Protection from parliamentary interference stifles domestic debate as to whether this ‘assistance’ makes Australia a co-belligerent with the US in Libya, Syria, Yemen and in Israel’s war on Gaza, as the codification of international law would suggest.

All this sets the scene for Australia’s role in the standoff with China, which is the immediate backdrop to *Subimperial Power*. Australia’s role may currently be auxiliary, but it is one of growing importance as Washington shifts from a policy of engagement to one of encirclement. Fernandes reads Biden’s 2021 National Defence Authorization Act as a detailed blueprint for surrounding China with a potentially suffocating network of US bases

and forces, and increasingly militarized partner states, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand—and Australia. The 2021 AUKUS deal, introduced under Scott Morrison's Coalition government, and then extended by Anthony Albanese's Labor Party once it came to power in July 2022, forms an important pillar of this, though Fernandes does not comment on how Australia's military-industrial policy compares to those of other US allies. Either way, at a projected cost of A\$368 billion (\$250 billion) over ten years, it is designed to make Australia's naval force 'interoperable'—indeed, interchangeable—with America's. This means the purchase of at least three Virginia-class submarines from the US in the 2030s, while Australia and the UK collaborate to build the new model SSN-AUKUS submarines between shipyards in Cumbria, Derby and South Australia. These will form a key part of this lattice work, threatening to choke off China's oil and gas imports through the Strait of Malacca.

In Australia today, as in the US, Chinese belligerence is the commonly invoked spectre that justifies all military spending, but *Subimperial Power* acknowledges China's relatively peaceful rise since 1992—without wars, slave-trading or overseas conquests—to become the world's second economy, lifting living standards dramatically. He points out two asymmetries between the adversarial powers: China, unlike America, has no regime-change agenda; and while it says it respects the freedom of navigation in its waters, it does not agree to the freedom of military navigation there on which the US insists. Fernandes cites the 2016 RAND report, *War with China: Thinking the Unthinkable*, which points out that both sides would have a military incentive to strike first, and that inconclusive results in early fighting could motivate both to fight on; the world economy would be rocked, the world order shattered, much of the Western Pacific turned into a war zone, with steep losses on both sides—though higher on China's—and potentially, no clear winner.

What would an open clash between the two of them look like for Australia? Fernandes cites the subimperial reflex response of several leading Australian politicians: 'Australia would have absolutely no alternative but to line up militarily beside the US'—'It would be inconceivable that we wouldn't support the US', and so forth. But as a retired defence official, Mike Scrafton, has damningly asked: what would Canberra's war aims be? Australia would still be on the same side of the Pacific as China after the war, and its own economy and defences would have been severely battered—as would those of its protector, the US. Not since the Second World War has there been any threat to Australia's home territory, but its intelligence facilities—read: Pine Gap and North West Cape—would be a likely Chinese target, as would the new naval base housing nuclear submarines in Western Australia. A more hawkish Lowy Institute critic of the RAND report warned that China's

best move would be to put enough pressure on South Korea to force the US to commit hundreds of thousands of ground troops there, pinning them down, with vulnerable supply chains, against a far more numerous adversary. The Australian army, Fernandes notes, could be sent to join the US in high-intensity conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Mightn't Australia's powerful mining interests intervene on the side of peace, to protect their Chinese markets? *Subimperial Power* points out that their big US-based investors may have more general interests in preserving an American-led system.

These prospects lend urgency to Fernandes's call to challenge the secrecy that surrounds Australia's subimperial structures as a first step in challenging 'the domestic structures of power'. That secrecy, he argues, does not serve to protect the Australian public but rather to shelter the actions of the security establishment from the public's view. He acknowledges that its status has served Australia relatively well; its prosperous society attracts more highly skilled immigrants than Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and Canada, and a sizeable majority of Australians support the alliance with the United States. A 2021 Lowy Institute poll showed that three out of four Australians believe it to be 'a natural extension' of the 'many common values and ideals' they share with America; at the same time, 63 per cent saw China as a security threat. A Pew Research Center survey conducted this year saw Australia (at 85 per cent) rank second, only under Japan (and above the US), for having 'negative attitudes' toward China.

That complacent identification is what this slender volume sets out to shake. It examines a part of Australian political life that has been abandoned to the 'experts'—itself a symptom of what Fernandes describes as Australia's self-subordinated status, with its attendant hollowing out of domestic discourse. *Subimperial Power* should be warmly welcomed; an intelligent critical analysis of Australia's role in the world is a rare event. Studies of the country's military and foreign-policy record are more likely to be additions to the pile of what Fernandes would call subimperial ideology than deconstructions of it. Good reports have been published on the country's regional role, mainly from broad-left perspectives, focusing on East Timor, West Papua and Indonesia; but these rarely situate this corner of the Southwest Pacific in its international setting. *Subimperial Power* is a short, thematically structured work with a clear thesis; an excellent introduction. Inevitably, there is more to be said.

It's a strength of his book that Fernandes not only acknowledges but integrates into the structure of his argument Australian colonization practices on the surrounding Southwest Pacific islands—Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Nauru—as well as East Timor. Subimperialism means both subordination to US grand strategy and the capacity to dominate in Australia's own neighbourhood. What is omitted from this picture, though, is consideration

of how Australia's international subimperial status relates to its settler-colonial expropriation of indigenous lands at home. This history of violent dispossession, of course, lies at the heart of Australia's nation-building project, though a 'a cult of national amnesia', as Gumbaynggirr historian Gary Foley has called it, tends to occlude this fact. Indigenous territory continues to be a casualty of Australia's foreign policies, including the US–Australian military bases that are built on annexed Aboriginal lands. That the government gives first-nations names to these places—the former spy facility known as Nurrungar derived its name from the local aboriginal word meaning 'listen'; it lay ten miles north of the RAAF base Woomera, called after the Kokotha spear-throwing instrument—is a particularly perverse feature of Australia's subimperialism. With expropriation at the behest of the US military apparatus comes despoliation of the land, not least by radioactive waste—an issue back on the agenda now as the Labor Party government looks for remote locations on which to dump the nuclear waste generated by the AUKUS submarines.

Another strength is to foreground AUKUS, with its forthright commitment to the US war machine, as a globally relevant escalation in the alliance. The book arrives in a context of rising domestic criticism of AUKUS, albeit none of it addressing the related historical, economic and political dimensions to which Fernandes gives the name 'subimperialism', a category that allows him to draw the line from nuclear submarines all the way back to the First Fleet. Why have Australians so readily accepted the government line, by way of Washington, that Beijing presents a sufficient threat to warrant the latest nuclear-naval build up? Despite his commitment to mapping the structural dynamics of subimperialism, Fernandes is less interested in scrutinizing the domestic-political ones that underpin it. He notes that when the British government finally passed the Statute of Westminster in 1931, relinquishing control of the Australian Parliament, four Australian prime ministers in a row delayed adopting it; but he doesn't do much to explain the deep cultural and political timidity that underpinned Australia's 'reluctant, fragmented and gradual path to independence' and beyond.

A more capacious working definition of imperialism might help to bridge the gap. Fernandes's concept, borrowed from Doyle, emphasizes a state's 'control' over the effective sovereignty of others, but the question of how that non-coercive control works remains unexplored. Unlike Gramsci's concept of hegemony, for example, this more limited definition of imperialism has little to say about consent and identification, or about the renewal and reproduction of ideologies—though as *Subimperial Power* repeatedly emphasizes, Australia is a willing participant in the US order, eager to make itself compatible with American power. It's worth exploring the gulf between Australians' own self-conception as relaxed, even rebellious, in the face of authority, all

the while, as Fernandes has shown, accepting the rules handed down from above when it comes to questions of state and interstate power.

When it comes to political timidity, the Australian Labor Party deserves special mention. Keen not to be wedged on questions of national security, Albanese's then-opposition Labor Party took less than twenty-four hours after being briefed to give Morrison's AUKUS its fulsome backing. Once in power, it extended the treaties, and no dissent from inside the Party has since been heard. There is little sign of life in the hollowed-out branches either, only three of which brought motions critical of AUKUS to the ALP conference this year; none of them was heard. There's a long history to this subservience, as leaders have watched any whiff of independence be met with severe punishment from Washington. Gough Whitlam's mild attempts at charting an independent course on foreign policy, including the possibility of not renewing the lease on Pine Gap, led to his 'dismissal' in 1975, presided over by the Governor-General, the role itself a subimperial hangover from the British-dominion years. Thirty years later, at the time of the financial crisis, Kevin Rudd, though keen to stress his pro-American credentials, made diplomatic efforts in the Asia Pacific that didn't tie in smoothly enough, according to leaked cables, with Obama's 'pivot to Asia'. He was removed from office in 2010 by a group in his own Labor Party who were reporting to the US Embassy. In his wake, Julia Gillard was installed and quickly expanded US troops' presence in the country's north.

The national characteristics of Australian subimperialism open, too, the question of subimperial politics in other corners of the globe. What further light might a more systematically comparative perspective shed on Fernandes's key term? Though he mentions Israel as another subimperial power, its contrasts with Australia—in strategic sovereignty, metropolitan influence, economic diversity—suggest the need for a more differentiated toponymy of 'subimperialism' itself. Should the EU, with its massive regional influence yet nato-subordinated armed forces, be counted the largest subimperial polity of them all? Fernandes assigns the UK the higher status of 'lieutenant with nuclear weapons', but amid the residue of its own imperial prowess, does it not display its own subimperial tendencies, positioning itself as an enthusiastic executor of US strategy, much like Canberra? Britain's forces have moved in lockstep with Washington's since Blair. Is there a difference between states that are born subimperial, so to speak, like Australia and Canada, and those—like Germany and Japan—that have had subimperialism hammered into them by military defeat? For that matter, what makes some states apparently impervious to its appeal?

Images of Labor PM Albanese standing beside an aviator-clad Biden in San Diego last year, a backdrop of blue skies and black subs, bragging about nuclear-tech transfers—the US is sharing its nuclear secrets 'for

only the second time in its history!’—speak to Fernandes’s point about the desire for recognition, the craving for strategic relevance. They also incriminate the Australian Labor Party. In its gleeful, backslapping adoption of AUKUS, Labor has redirected decades of spending away from basic social programmes, funnelling it into the American war furnace instead. It does this while clamping down on any meaningful discussion of what an alternative foreign policy might look like. Older Labor grandees, freed from party discipline, may rail against AUKUS as ‘the worst deal in all history’ (Paul Keating) and a ‘joke in bad taste’ (Gareth Evans); the signing away of ‘any kind of sovereign agency’. Should tensions erupt in the South China Sea, however, there’s little doubt that Australia’s new ‘interoperable’ weaponry will oblige in what follows—a point explicitly made by Biden’s Indo-Pacific czar Kurt Campbell when he judged that with AUKUS, ‘we have them locked in for the next forty years’. Australia’s own developing nuclear facilities on the continent’s west coast would make not only a military target, but expose those Pacific Islands—never consulted over AUKUS, despite Foreign Minister Penny Wong’s overtures to the ‘Pacific Family’—that stand between them and China. Devoid of any vision beyond technocratic tinkering and maintaining the profits shovelled in from a continent-wide quarry, AUKUS offered Labor some (second-hand) opportunity for grandeur.

The urgent task of establishing a coalition to challenge AUKUS will require confronting the ALP, this most subimperial of Australian political institutions, and overcoming the left associations it continues to disingenuously lug around. The Australian Greens—distinguished among Greens internationally for their more critical foreign-policy positions, including open opposition to AUKUS—are already the country’s third party at 12 per cent of the national vote, and are in reach of 15 per cent at the next election. Courting the union affiliation that Labor has long abused, they may be in a better position to challenge the ALP and spearhead sorely needed anti-war and anti-nuclear mass politics that have yet to cohere. In this context, *Subimperial Power* may help to supply these new forces with an international map and a properly global set of compass points.