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By Oscar Grenfell
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Australian ruling elite responds to Chinese condemnation of Afghan war crimes with nationalist hysteria

A tweet by a mid-ranking Chinese official, condemning Australian war crimes in Afghanistan, has been met with hysterical denunciations by the entire political and media establishment. The response can only be described as a staggering exercise in hypocrisy, confected outrage and an attempt to whip-up a wartime nationalist frenzy.

On Monday, Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry's information department, tweeted: "Shocked by murder of Afghan civilians & prisoners by Australian soldiers. We strongly condemn such acts, & call for holding them accountable." The post was accompanied by a graphic, produced by a visual artist, showing an Australian soldier holding a knife to the neck of an Afghan child.

There was nothing controversial, or even debatable, about the post. It referenced substantiated allegations of war crimes by Australian special forces which have shocked millions of people across Australia and internationally. Last week, the Brereton inquiry, initiated by the Australian military, revealed "credible information" that special forces soldiers murdered at least 39 Afghan prisoners and soldiers between 2009 and 2013.



Credit: Twitter

Page 120 of the Brereton report noted an alleged incident during which special forces soldiers "were driving along a road and saw two 14-year-old boys whom they decided might be Taliban sympathisers. They stopped, searched the boys and slit their throats." Military insiders stated that this was "not an isolated" occurrence. Other anonymous witnesses said it was routine for all of the young men and boys of a village to be found with their throats slashed after an Australian special forces raid.

The revelations have not produced any great soul searching in ruling circles. The Liberal-National Coalition, Labor and the military command, having presided over the crimes and then covered them up for years, are now claiming they were the product of “rogue elements.” No one above the level of patrol command, so the story goes, knew anything.

The political and military authorities are only able to peddle this utterly implausible narrative because there is no prospect of difficult questions from a pliant corporate media. After supporting the illegal US-led wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and promoting the lies used to justify them, the major publications are now uncritically promoting the official whitewash.

Everything has been done to downplay the crimes, defend the military as a “great Australian institution” and cover-up the fact that illegal killings were part and parcel of a neo-colonial occupation aimed at subjugating a hostile population.

Having treated the horrific murders of Afghan civilians as a minor inconvenience and an unfortunate embarrassment, however, the establishment politicians and the media have found something “horrific” and “despicable” to get upset about... Zhao Lijian’s post condemning the killings!

Last week, Morrison responded to the Brereton report by describing its contents as “disturbing and distressing.” At a press conference on Monday, the passive and ambivalent tone was replaced by strident denunciation and unconcealed fury. The Chinese tweet was “truly repugnant,” “utterly outrageous” and could “not be justified on any basis.”

Morrison, presenting his government as the wounded party, demanded an official apology from China and called on Twitter to immediately censor the post.

A week after official confirmation that Australian troops had murdered civilians in cold blood and committed the most serious violations of international law, Morrison declared: “I am extremely proud of all Australians who pull a uniform on for Australia... I am proud of their loyalty to our country and its values.” His words were not chosen accidentally. Among “all Australians who put on a uniform” are those who slashed the throats of Afghan children.

Labor leader, Anthony Albanese, has previously declared that the killings “don’t represent who we are as a nation.” In July, he insisted: “Overwhelmingly our men and women in uniform do this nation proud.”

As with the prime minister, Albanese struck a very different note in response to the tweet. “Australia’s condemnation of this image is above politics and we all stand as a nation in condemning it,” he told parliament. The post was “gratuitous, inflammatory and deeply offensive,” words far stronger than any he used to describe the war crimes themselves.

Albanese was not only signalling Labor’s full support for US-led imperialist wars. He was a senior minister in the Rudd and Gillard governments which expanded Australia’s involvement in the occupation of Afghanistan. This included participation in the Obama administration’s massive troop surge which involved a dramatic increase in “kill or capture raids.” All of the 39 confirmed murders were committed while Labor was in office.

The confected outrage over the tweet has gone global. New Zealand’s Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who did not condemn the war crimes, denounced the tweet and said that she would complain directly to the Chinese government. The image “wasn’t factual, it wasn’t correct.” Ardern, held up as an icon by liberal and feminist pundits, has spent the last three years trying to cover-up similar crimes in Afghanistan by New Zealand Special Forces.

The French authorities, who have terrorised North Africa for decades and are again ramping up their neo-colonial activities, condemned the tweet as “not worthy.”

According to the Australian press, the US administration, headed by fascistic conman Donald Trump, is also preparing an official condemnation. Already, the tweet has been denounced by numerous Congressmen and Senators, representatives of the imperialist country that has been

at war the longest of any nation in modern history and whose military is synonymous with death and destruction the world over.

For their part, Australia's corporate journalists appear to be in a competition to see who will describe the tweet in the most hysterical and deranged terms.

In a foul-mouthed tirade, Peter Hartcher, the political editor of the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, wrote that the post was "ISIS-level stuff." It was "garbage" that "only exposes [Chinese President] Xi's regime as thugs and grubs." An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper this morning said the tweet was an "act of grey zone warfare" and called for the use of "every element of hard and soft power," raising the prospect of a military provocation or attack.

Innumerable reporters have joined with the government in describing the image that accompanied the tweet as "fake" and "doctored." These claims are absurd and bizarre. The image was never presented as a photo of an actual incident, and does not look like one in the slightest. Most of those journalists write for publications that feature regular political cartoons.

Others have declared in sanctimonious terms that China's "human rights record" disqualifies its officials from commenting on the war crimes.

Who do these people think they are kidding? Socialists oppose the authoritarian, pro-capitalist regime in Beijing. But its crimes pale beside those of the US and its allies, including Australia.

Australian governments have participated in every US-led war since World War Two, from the assault on Korea, to the rape of Vietnam and the sociocide of Iraq. For the past 19 years, they have carried out military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia, whose criminality can only be compared to the actions of the Nazi regime.

At least a million people have been killed in Iraq as the result of an illegal war for oil, while hundreds of thousands have died in Afghanistan in a neo-colonial occupation to secure control of resources and a geo-strategically critical region.

Over the same two decades, China has not invaded a single country or launched one military attack.

The same journalists condemning Zhao's entirely factual post as "fake news" have written lurid and unsubstantiated accounts of Chinese human rights violations in Tibet and against the Uighur minority. These have dovetailed with and legitimised the aggressive US confrontation with China.

Domestically, they have peddled the claims of the intelligence agencies about "Chinese interference," in a McCarthyite campaign that is not supported by a shred of evidence.

Chinese officials have rejected the demand that they apologise for the tweet. Some have instead suggested that the Australian government ask forgiveness from the Afghan people for murdering civilians of that country.

A statement from China's Australian embassy succinctly summed up the purposes of the campaign: "The accusations made are simply to serve two purposes. One is to deflect public attention from the horrible atrocities by certain Australian soldiers. The other is to blame China for the worsening of bilateral ties. There may be another attempt to stoke domestic nationalism."

In addition, the reaction to the tweet is a warning to the working class. The frenzy of the government and the media is a further step down the road of outlawing widespread anti-war opposition. It is a precedent for branding all activities directed against imperialist war as so "offensive" and "repugnant" as to be beyond the pale.

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