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Feeling unsafe: a review of *The Coming War on China* (director: John Pilger)

China, as several very scary men tell John Pilger in his latest film, is the new enemy. The United States has already committed trillions of dollars to 'defence', and China will be the justification for spending \$52 billion more if Donald Trump gets his wish. A map shows the 800 bases the US has in more than 70 countries, and in the Asia-Pacific hemisphere they hang around China like a necklace. The bases are necessary, say these military and military-industrial men, because China threatens freedom of navigation and trade in the East and South China seas and challenges America's leadership of the 'free world'. From China's point of view, the bases look like a nuclear threat.

Pilger begins his approach to China with a description of the destruction of Hiroshima. The US having tested its bombs twice in Japan, it wanted more test sites and found them on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, where it conned the residents into accepting an 'experiment' that would benefit people everywhere. Instead, burns from the blasts killed many, gave many cancer, and produced deformed babies in the next generation. The evacuated Marshallese were encouraged to return to their devastated island when the US knew it was still unsafe to do so, and they were blighted again, while scientists eagerly collected the data on radiation exposure in humans.

Unable to live on oysters, fish, coconuts and fresh vegetables as before, canned American food is all the Marshallese have. Their diabetes rate, says Pilger, is the highest in the world. He challenges the senior US diplomat there to explain why US defence people and their families live in luxury on a base, while the Marshallese who work for them come and go by ferry from a polluted, crowded slum on another island. Each nuclear test cost millions, yet now they can't buy a school bus. The State Department man admits nothing has changed since the 1970s and thinks it's a 'challenge'.

The challenge persists in Okinawa too, where groups protest daily against Futenma, the US base that has been there since 1945, and against the military planes that constantly fly in and out of the centre of the city of Ginowan. The Okinawans don't want the deafening and dangerous base moved either, knowing from experience that moving it will simply relocate the US troops, their bars, prostitutes, accidents, rapes, and murders. Claiming the US nuclear deterrent is essential, and nervous about his far right-wing, Prime Minister Abe supports the base relocation to Henoko, near Camp Schwab, on reclaimed land that will destroy coral reefs.

The northernmost link in the chain around China is Jeju-do, a resort island off the coast of South Korea, where another large US base is under construction, in the face of local protests. Bases are

reopening in the Philippines too, and Pilger doesn't even investigate what's happening in Vietnam and Singapore. But the military types tell him most countries want the US to stay in the region to maintain 'stability'.

One of Pilger's Chinese interlocutors tells him that, having profited from the opium trade in the late 19th century, and having enforced restrictions on Chinese migration, Americans have never overcome their ignorance and hostility towards China. The blandishments of Chiang Kai-shek and his wife led to non-recognition of the People's Republic of China and US support of Taiwan, support which President Trump threatens to revive. Mao Tse-tung's early overtures to the US were not answered. His aspirations and those of his successors to have China resume its rightful place in the region are still ignored. Yet, as a Chinese sociologist tells Pilger, China has never had an empire abroad, nor attacked distant countries; Chinese were more concerned to build walls for defence.

A nuclear war, Pilger points out, will be unsurvivable. Yet he shows how close we have come to it several times. Early in his presidency Obama in Prague committed America 'to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons', promised to ratify the nuclear test ban treaty, and to call a global summit to eliminate nuclear stockpiles. Instead, his administration modernised and built up US nuclear capacity to an unprecedented level. This, says Pilger, is how democracies behave: their leaders tell the people one thing, then allow those under them to do another. His film leads logically to Trump, blathering on about making America great again.

Australia, as a bead in the necklace around China, is deeply implicated by Pine Gap and by other bases under construction. Obama's drone strikes in Iraq, Pilger says, are coordinated from Pine Gap. A future government which tried to close them, as Malcolm Fraser recommended, would probably be 'destabilised'. When an American interviewee trotted out the usual denial that the US has any bases in Australia, the Sydney audience laughed. It is perhaps not strange, but it is unfortunate that this crowd-funded film is being shown only once in one cinema in a couple of cities, and with next to no publicity. The packed house applauded, and in spite of what we spend on defence and 'security', their questions to Pilger suggested they felt distinctly unsafe.