

Former Australian prime minister denounces Trump over China

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Paul Keating, Labor Party treasurer from 1983 to 1992, and prime minister of Australia from 1992–1996, has denounced the incoming Trump administration for threatening to “involve Australia in war with China.” While not advocating a break with the US-Australia military alliance, his intervention reflects the fears within Australian ruling circles of a catastrophic conflict.

Keating issued his statement on January 13, following the confirmation hearing of Rex Tillerson, Trump’s nominee for secretary of state. Tillerson stated before the US Senate that the new administration would demand that China stop reclaiming land around islets and reefs in the South China Sea, and that Chinese access to the islands “is not going to be allowed.”

The only way the United States could deny China access to the islands and reefs it occupies in the South China Sea would be through military means. The *Global Times*, a mouthpiece of the Chinese regime, responded with an editorial declaring that Tillerson had “better bone up on nuclear power strategies” if the US intended to try to force China to withdraw from territory—a warning that clashes could rapidly escalate into the use of nuclear weapons.

Keating stated that the Australian government should tell the Trump administration that “Australia will not be part of such adventurism, just as we should have done in Iraq 15 years ago.... That means no naval commitment to joint operations in the South China Sea.” He declared: “Australia’s prosperity and the security of the world would be devastated by war.”

No one from the governing Liberal-National Coalition, the opposition Labor Party, the Greens, or the various self-styled independents and “third” parties has publicly criticised Tillerson’s comments—and the prospect that if they are translated into action could

trigger a nuclear war. Foreign minister Julie Bishop would only tell journalists that the government “will not speculate” on the possible policies of a Trump administration.

Keating’s concerns, however, are more broadly shared in ruling circles. The dilemma that has faced Australian imperialism for over three decades is that while it relies on its alliance with the US to assert its strategic and economic interests in Asia and internationally, its main export markets and trading partners are the major Asian states, with China now being the largest.

Washington’s insistence that Beijing bow down to American dominance of Asia, combined with flagrant military provocations, has led to growing calls from within the Australian corporate and political establishment for Australia to use its influence to urge the US to back away from a confrontation.

Keating is a vocal spokesman for this layer of the ruling elite. While supporting the continuation of the US alliance, they believe that the priority of Australia’s foreign policy has to be Asia. Keating has been a particular advocate of stronger relations with Indonesia and for Australia to join the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Instead, the Liberal-National government from 1996 to 2007 pursued an ever-closer alignment with the United States. Australian forces were sent to fight alongside the US in Afghanistan. In 2003, Australia was part of the “coalition of the willing”—the handful of countries who joined with Washington to violate international law and illegally invade Iraq.

Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who came to office in 2007, sought to shift the orientation back toward Asia, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis underscored just how dependent Australia was on

exports to China. Rudd angered Washington with proposals that the US concede greater regional influence to Beijing, at the very point the Obama administration was preparing its confrontational “pivot” to Asia.

Rudd was removed as prime minister in June 2010 in an inner-party political coup, organised by a pro-US faction within the top leadership of the Labor Party and discussed in advance with Washington. He was replaced by Julia Gillard, who fully aligned Australia with the “pivot,” which has involved a massive build-up of American military force and diplomatic pressure against China. Labor agreed to sweeping new US basing arrangements in Australia—including marines and aircraft operating from Darwin; an expansion of the Pine Gap spy base; the establishment of a satellite-tracking facility in Western Australia; and increased naval visits and joint operations.

After Labor was thrown out of office in 2013, the integration of Australia into US preparations for military conflict with China has continued and expanded under the Coalition governments of Tony Abbott and current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

There is no question that the overwhelming majority of the Australian establishment expected that Hillary Clinton would win the US election and that the concerted pressure being applied against China would continue to develop much as it had been under Obama. Instead they face Trump, with his promise to repudiate the Trans Pacific Partnership and threats to declare trade war on Beijing and ratchet up tensions over Taiwan, the South China Sea and North Korea.

The heightened level of rhetoric from Trump and cabinet nominees has led to expressions of guarded concern over the extent to which Australian foreign policy and its military has been developed into an adjunct of Washington.

Immediately following Trump’s election on November 9, mild criticisms of his potential policies were made by Labor foreign affairs spokesperson Penny Wong. The Greens called for a “debate” in parliament on the future of the alliance, which the Coalition and Labor joined together to reject. Keating commented in a television interview: “The foreign policy of Australia is basically we have tag-along rights to the US.... It’s time to cut the tag. It’s time to get out of it.”

On December 22, Kevin Rudd spoke on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, warning against immediately following the US into a war with China. He declared: “We should under no circumstances repeat, I think, the hideous mistake ... by simply being a cheer squad for what was then the Bush administration’s determination to invade Iraq.... Our responsibility is to say, ‘Our friends in Washington, you cannot and must not do this, for the following clear reasons’.”

For all the concern, however, Australia’s integration with the US continues apace. During a visit to Sydney in December, US Pacific Command chief Admiral Harry Harris announced that F-22 stealth fighters will be operating from northern Australian bases in 2017. The next deployment of US marines and warships to Darwin will begin arriving in April.



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