

Former Australian PM denounced for criticising AUKUS alliance

Mike Head, Peter Symonds
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Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating came under attack after last week condemning this month's suddenly-announced AUKUS pact, which includes the US and UK supplying Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines.

Drawn up behind the backs of the population, the new tripartite partnership dramatically escalates the Australian ruling elite's involvement in US preparations for war against China.

In a newspaper column, Keating accused both the Liberal-National Coalition government and the opposition Labor Party of "shopping" Australia's sovereignty by "locking the country and its military forces into the force structure of the United States."

As he has previously, Keating criticised the confrontational stance taken by the US and its allies toward China. While repeating Washington's propaganda that China has adopted a "more aggressive international posture," he dismissed the claim that it represents a "threat" to Australia.

The former prime minister pointed out that the use of the word "threat" explicitly connoted "military aggression or invasion, a threat China has never made against Australia or even implied making." He pointedly noted: "China does not attack other states, unlike the United States, which does attack other states."

Keating is in no sense an opponent of imperialist war, nor of Australia's military alliance with the United States. In fact, he was a loyal and ardent defender of the US alliance when he was in office from 1983 to 1996, first as treasurer then prime minister.

With Prime Minister Bob Hawke, he was a party to dispatching forces to join the first US invasion of Iraq in 1991, which initiated the past three decades of wars conducted by Washington to seek to reassert its global hegemony.

However, Keating speaks for sections of the corporate elite intensely concerned over the economic impact and strategic implications of the increasingly naked US war preparations against China, which is by far Australian capitalism's largest export market.

Keating accused the government and Labor of "taking a massive bet on the United States and its staying power in Asia." In other words, he is not opposed to the predatory

actions of US imperialism as such, but to locking Australia into a US confrontation with China with potentially disastrous consequences.

It is not the first time that Keating has criticised governments, Coalition and Labor, for their commitment to the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China that began with the Obama administration and escalated under Trump and Biden.

Because of the far-reaching implications of the AUKUS pact, however, his latest comments provoked strident opposition. Overwhelmingly, the political and media establishment has sided with Washington against Beijing because Australia, a middle order imperialist power, has depended on US backing to prosecute its own interests in the region and internationally.

The *Australian's* editor Greg Sheridan, who has close connections to the US-linked military-intelligence apparatus, lashed out at Keating saying he had "blown a gasket." Sheridan branded as "bizarre" Keating's statement of the obvious: that acquiring nuclear submarines would be provocative to China and make Australia subservient to US strategic policy.

Some corporate media commentators even accused Keating of supporting an alleged offensive by China to take over the region. Peter Hartcher, the political and international editor of Nine Entertainment's *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, declared: "Keating would prefer that everyone defer to Beijing as the rightful ruler of the Indo-Pacific." Nine News political editor Chris Uhlmann charged Keating with routinely advising that "giving in to Beijing is just so much easier than making a fuss."

Labor spokesmen were among the most vociferous, intent on underscoring Labor's backing for the AUKUS alliance and Labor's historical record of championing the US military alliance.

Anthony Byrne, deputy chair of parliament's bipartisan intelligence and security committee, accused Keating of "trivialising and mocking our national security priorities" and doing Labor "a great disservice." Another Labor MP, Peter Khalil, who was national security director in the US occupation government in Iraq during 2003, wrote: "Keating is wilfully blind to China's international aggression."

Keating is virtually isolated in ruling circles. The only similar comments came from Australian National University strategic

studies professor Hugh White. “In the escalating rivalry between America and China, we’re siding with the United States and we’re betting they are going to win this one,” White told the media. “But the fact is, that when we look 10 or 20 years ahead, I don’t think we can assume the United States is going to succeed in pushing back effectively against China.”

The attacks on Keating underscore the intensification of the establishment’s commitment to the US alliance and its determination to prevent any splits in ruling circles from opening the door for the widespread anti-war sentiment among workers and youth.

Under these conditions, appreciation is being expressed in the corporate media for Labor’s bipartisan support for AUKUS. In the *Australian*, Sheridan said the Labor leadership deserved “enormous credit” for their “responsible, sober and realistic national interest approach.”

Sheridan voiced concern that a delay in acquiring nuclear submarines could allow dissent to develop. “If we don’t start building for another nine years, that gives an enormous amount of time for opposition to the project to grow,” he wrote.

Penny Wong, Labor’s shadow foreign minister, delivered a speech to the government-backed US Studies Centre last week to underline Labor’s commitment to quelling opposition to the AUKUS pact.

Wong urged Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government to bring Labor “into the tent in pursuit of a shared national interest” and adopt Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s proposal for a bipartisan consultation mechanism on how best to implement the submarine program.

Wong paid homage to the US alliance, hailing it as a “friendship forged in the fire of war.” At the same time, she tried to downplay the significance of the AUKUS agreement, declaring that it was “not a new treaty, nor a formal alliance,” but was just “an agreement to co-operate more closely on cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities.”

Wong’s comments are absurd. Australia and Britain are already formal military allies of the United States. Providing Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines that can operate at great distances for lengthy periods underscores the military character of the AUKUS agreement. Regardless of any formal treaty, the three powers are lining up militarily against China.

Wong timidly questioned whether the announcement could have been better handled, suggesting that France, which counts itself as a Pacific power and was angered by being sidelined, could have been informed beforehand.

With an eye to Keating’s criticism, Wong asked: “With the prospect of a higher level of technological dependence on the US, how does the Morrison-Joyce government assure Australians that we can act alone when need be; that we have the autonomy to defend ourselves, however and whenever we need to?”

No such “autonomy” is possible. Nuclear-powered submarines require extensive technological facilities and access to highly-enriched uranium. Moreover, Australian imperialism always has been reliant strategically, first on Britain and then since World War II on the US. Australia’s forces are already deeply integrated into those of the US. Australia, which hosts the Pine Gap weapons guidance base and other key military facilities critical to the US war machine, would automatically be engulfed in any US war against China.

Labor’s stance dovetails with those in the ruling class calling for a vast expansion of Australia’s military spending and weaponry in order to pursue the mercenary interests of Australian imperialism across the region, while still retaining the backing of the US. The government-subsidised Australian Strategic Policy Institute published a post-AUKUS comment insisting that the days were gone in which Australia could rely on “an insurance policy costing a measly 2 percent of GDP because the US was subsidising our security.”

In the final analysis, as far as the ruling class is concerned, critics like Keating offer no viable alternative for defending the interests of Australian imperialism. The dominant factions of the Australian political, military and intelligence establishment have placed the country on the frontline of a potentially catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers.

No faith can be placed any section of the ruling elite, including figures like Keating. The only means for averting the danger of war is by forging an international anti-war movement, unifying workers in the US, China and worldwide in a common struggle, based on a socialist perspective, to abolish the capitalist profit system that is the source of the lurch toward another world war.



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