Ex-Australian PM denounced for calling for coexistence with China

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Making his first speech at Australia's National Press Club in 26 years, former Labor Party Prime Minister Paul Keating warned this week against the dangers for Australian capitalism of joining a US-led war against China, including over Taiwan.

Keating opposed the bipartisan line-up by Labor behind the Liberal-National Coalition government's signing of September's AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) agreement, pointing out that the pact openly signalled an aggressive drive to militarily contain and confront China.

The AUKUS focus on the provision of nuclear-powered, long-range attack submarines to Australia marked a naked shift to war preparations, Keating observed. The aim was to cut off China's capacity to deploy its own naval vessels beyond its coastal waters in order to respond to a US attack.

"Until not many years ago, the US Pacific Fleet drove 12 miles off the edge of the Chinese territorial sea on the Chinese continental shelf," Keating said. "Could you imagine the attitude of the United States if the Chinese blue water navy was sailing 12 miles off the territorial sea of California? There'd be outrage everywhere."

Keating declared that Australia should not join a US war to supposedly defend Taiwan. Keating said involvement in such a war would not be in the nation's security interests. "Taiwan is not a vital Australian interest," he said. "We have no alliance with Taipei, none."

But the Biden administration is ramping up Washington's provocations against China over Taiwan, effectively calling into question the One China policy by which the US effectively recognised Beijing as the legitimate government over China, including Taiwan, in 1979.

Keating, who adhered closely to the US military and strategic alliance while in office from 1983 to 1996, first as treasurer and then prime minister, was not speaking as an opponent of US imperialism. In fact, he insisted: "It is important to have American military power in Asia to deal with any pushiness by other states, including China."

At the same time, Keating appealed for the US to coexist with the rise of China as a capitalist rival, at least in East Asia. And he said Australia's "national interest" had been damaged by too closely aligning behind Washington's escalating moves against Beijing.

"My point is that China is now so big and it is going to grow so large, it will have no precedents in modern social economic history," he said. "Therefore, our challenge is to have the United States remain as a balancing and conciliatory power in Asia."

The US had to "come to a point of accommodation where it acknowledges China's pre-eminence in east Asia and the Asian mainland, in which case we can start to move towards a sensible relationship again with China."

As he has for a number of years, Keating reflects the concerns of those sections of the country's corporate elite most dependent on the super-profits generated by massive resources exports to China, which remains Australia's largest export market by far.

Revealingly, Keating drew a contrast between the confrontation with Beijing and his prime ministerial embrace of the Suharto military dictatorship in Indonesia, which he lauded as a bulwark against instability in the region, that is, as a guarantor of suppression of the working class.

Keating's stance, dubbed "realism" in ruling circles, may align with elements within the Chinese regime, which are looking for a mutually beneficial relationship with US imperialism, and within the US ruling elite, such as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who helped architect the One China policy.

Keating is completely unable to explain, however, why the US, under Obama, Trump and Biden, has relentlessly pursued an aggressive confrontation with China. Behind

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the tension lies the very economic growth of China since the 1970s, as a cheap labour platform for global capitalism, which now makes it an existential threat to the hegemony that US imperialism acquired after World War II. Ever since the Obama administration unveiled its "pivot to Asia" against China in 2011, Washington has been preparing for military conflict with Beijing if necessary to restore the unchallenged domination of the US.

Another Labor prime minister, Kevin Rudd, argued in 2008 for the US to accommodate itself to China's rise. He was ousted by a backroom Labor Party coup engineered by US "protected sources" inside the Labor and trade union apparatus in mid-2010. Rudd was replaced by Julia Gillard, who quickly doubled down on Labor's unconditional commitment to the US, including by agreeing to station US Marines in the northern strategic city of Darwin.

That helps explain why Keating's speech drew such vehement denunciation throughout the political and media establishment. Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that Keating was "out of line" for asserting that China was not a threat to Australia. Defence Minister Peter Dutton branded Keating as "Grand Appeaser Comrade Keating." The *Australian*'s foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, derided Keating's speech as "gibberish," "strategic madness" and "basically nuts."

Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese essentially disowned Keating, saying "China has changed its posture—that's the truth" and Australia had to "speak up for our own values." As one of these "values," Albanese reiterated that the first "principle" of Labor's foreign policy was "our alliance with the United States."

One aspect of Keating's remarks attracted support, however, notably from Sheridan. That was Keating's condemnation of the lengthy delay—two decades—involved in the acquisition of a fleet of eight nuclear submarines from the US or UK, by which time they could be ineffective against China. Keating criticised the axing of the previous submarine deal with France, which he described as a major Pacific power, that could have delivered a nuclear submarine capacity in a shorter time frame.

Sheridan said Keating's critique of the delay was "broadly true." Morrison's government had continued the "pathetic national tradition" of not acquiring a defence force with "strike capability" and "war-fighting mass" and instead maintained a "shocking" dependence on the US.

Sheridan's response highlights how Keating's calls for a more "independent" foreign policy meshes with those of figures, such as Sheridan and Dutton, in the political, corporate and military-intelligence establishment, demanding a vast military build-up to strengthen Australian capitalism's strategic position, as US conflict with China looms.

This militaristic debate underscores the anxiety within the Australian ruling class over the implications of the perceived decline in US power, which was heightened by this year's calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The truth is that Australia, a middle-order imperialist power, has always relied on the greatest power of the day—first Britain, then America—to prosecute its own strategic and plundering interests. In that pursuit, the lives of thousands of Australian soldiers have been squandered, alongside millions of others, in every imperialist conflict, from World Wars I and II to Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Significantly, Keating's speech and the outcry it generated also occur in the face of an escalation of the class struggle internationally, under the impact of mounting social inequality and the disastrous profit-driven policies of the world's ruling classes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as those in power try to whip up anti-Chinese prejudice and beat the war drums as a means of diverting these class tensions outward against a demonised "enemy," there is nervousness that a catastrophic conflict with China could provoke widespread anti-war sentiment.

But no section of the ruling elite, including Keating, is anti-war. The only way to avert a third world war is to forge an international anti-war movement, unifying workers in the US, China, Australia and worldwide in a common struggle, based on a socialist perspective, to abolish the capitalist profit system that is the source of the war danger.

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