

US Navy Secretary: AUKUS submarine pact is about “defeating” China

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In a little reported meeting last week, top Biden administration officials declared that the AUKUS agreement for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines was aimed at “defeating” China, which they described as the “threat of our lifetime.”

The bellicose remarks were delivered at a Washington function last Monday, attended by an Australian delegation, including government and opposition politicians, and representatives of arms manufacturers.

The Australians, Labor MP Meryl Swanson and Liberal Senator James Paterson, were in Washington to discuss the implementation of the \$368 billion submarine deal announced last month. Under the agreement, Australia will acquire a US fleet of nuclear-powered submarines next decade, before beginning joint construction on a new design of the submarine in cooperation with Britain.

The trip by Swanson and Paterson was extraordinarily low profile with hardly any media coverage or information from the government. This is undoubtedly because the AUKUS pact has provoked widespread opposition within Australia. The content of the discussions, moreover, undermined claims that Australia’s acquisition of the subs is in any way a defensive move, intended as a “deterrent,” as the Labor government has asserted.

Instead, top US officials presented AUKUS, the US militarist pact with Britain and Australia, as well as the submarines themselves, as an aggressive instrument of American foreign policy.

Speaking at the dinner, US Navy Secretary Carlos del Toro proclaimed: “Having been born in Cuba I personally understand what communism is all about, and it is indeed the threat of China and their destruction of the world order that we are committed, as three nations, to defeat in every possible way.”

Del Toro’s hysterical anti-communist rant, about a Chinese regime that restored capitalism decades ago, was no doubt bound up with his background in the fascistic Cuban emigre community in the US.

However, the same essential point was also made by

Republican Congressman Rob Wittman, who is the vice-chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. He declared: “Make no mistake about [it], the threat of our lifetime is the Chinese Communist Party. No two ways about it. It will test every aspect of who we are as nations.”

To speak about the “defeat” of China and to refer to Beijing as the “threat of our lifetime,” at a gathering primarily attended by arms dealers, can have only one meaning. Del Toro and Wittman were clearly stating that AUKUS and the submarine deal is a preparation for war with China.

That was more or less acknowledged by the one report in the corporate press about the gathering, an article in the *Australian*.

The remarks, it admitted, were an “apparent confirmation of Chinese and Russian accusations the three-nation military alliance, which has undertaken to equip Australia with at least eight nuclear powered submarines by the 2040s, was aimed at Beijing and Moscow.” The *Australian* noted that the comments were far more explicit than those made by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, his British counterpart Rishi Sunak or Biden, when they announced the subs deal.

The statements were fully in line with the doctrines of the US government and the Pentagon. In 2018, a Pentagon strategy document declared: “Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security.” It explicitly identified China and Russia as threats to US global dominance.

The Biden administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy asserted: “We will effectively compete with the People’s Republic of China, which is the only competitor with both the intent and, increasingly, the capability to reshape the international order.”

Other US government documents have acknowledged that China is not a threat to the global activities of the American military. Last year, for instance, the annual Department of Defence report stated that China’s sole military ambition was to “restrict the US from having a presence on China’s

periphery.”

In reality, the references to the “international order,” express fears that China’s economic growth, occurring amid a protracted decline of US imperialism, threatens the preeminence of American capitalism.

The comments by del Toro and Wittman underscore the lying character of the Labor Party’s various justifications for the submarine deal.

When it was initially announced, Albanese, together with his Defence Minister Richard Marles vaguely stated that the submarines would serve to defend the northern approaches of Australia. The clear implication was that Australia somehow faced the prospect of an invasion launched from Asia.

Speaking at the National Press Club last month, former Prime Minister Paul Keating demolished these insinuations. He noted that the Chinese would need to launch an armada that would have to travel some 6,000 kilometres, before arriving in the largely barren and uninhabited northern and western reaches of the vast continent. China, moreover, had no conceivable motivation to conduct such an operation.

Instead, the warnings were a thinly-veiled rehash of the racist claims of a “yellow peril” from the north, associated with the “White Australia” policy on which the country was founded. Their aim was to obscure the fact that the long-range, nuclear-powered submarines would be tasked with conducting offensive operations off China’s coastline as part of any US-led war.

Following Keating’s intervention, the Australian government changed tack. Two days after his remarks, Marles stated that the subs deal was not a commitment that Australia would automatically join a US-led war against China. Instead, its purpose was to protect Australian trade routes that flow through the Indo-Pacific.

This line was even more fanciful than the suggestions of a Chinese invasion. As many commentators noted, the vast bulk of Australian trade in the region is with China. Marles was essentially stating that the nuclear-powered submarines were necessary to protect Chinese trade... from China.

One aspect of the Australian tour seems to have been to assure the Biden administration that Keating’s positions, and broader opposition to AUKUS, would be resisted. An article in Nine Media publications shortly after Senator Paterson and MP Swanson arrived in Washington was headlined “Keating’s blistering attack on AUKUS leaves Australia in damage control in US.”

Paterson said he had “already been asked by people here about it, who are really interested to know who he [Keating] speaks on behalf of, whether he has support, and whether it’s a danger to AUKUS.”

Paterson added: “Keating is not just any former PM—he’s

got extraordinary stature and has a respected global profile. So if those kinds of narratives eat away at public support and aren’t refuted, that’s quite dangerous.”

The right-wing senator, who has the closest of ties to the military-intelligence apparatus, praised the Labor government for immediately denouncing Keating. “[W]e wouldn’t want any of our partners to misconstrue that he is speaking for all of Labor in some way,” Paterson said.

Keating, a right-wing figure, is not in any way opposed to war or American imperialism. He represents a minority wing of the ruling elite, fearful of the consequences of full-blown war with Australia’s largest trading partner.

This layer is increasingly isolated, with the dominant sections of the establishment making clear they will continue to pursue the interests of Australian imperialism in lockstep with the Biden administration, even if it means a war with China.

A key component of the Australian alignment with this war drive has been an hysterical campaign against purported “foreign interference” in Australia from China. This McCarthyite effort, which has rolled on for at least six years without finding a shred of evidence of “interference,” included the bipartisan passage of draconian legislation in 2018, potentially outlawing much anti-war opposition.

However, in the pages of the corporate press, it is noted without critical comment that top US officials are agitating against the opinions of former Prime Minister Keating, including in secretive backroom meetings with Australian government and opposition spokespeople. The obvious point—that this clearly constitutes “foreign interference”—is simply ignored.

Of far more significance than the tactical criticisms of AUKUS made by figures such as Keating, is the broad opposition of workers and young people. The AUKUS announcement has provoked widespread shock and anger, after ordinary people have been kept in the dark about Australia’s escalating role in the US plans for war with China over the past decade. The \$368 billion spend on the submarines will inevitably require massive cuts to social spending, intensifying a developing upsurge of the class struggle that will increasingly be directed against war.



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