Former Australian PM says the US is an “aggressor” targeting China

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In an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7:30” program last Thursday, former Prime Minister Paul Keating branded the US as an “aggressor” targeting China in the Indo-Pacific. He condemned the militarist AUKUS pact, involving the US, Britain and Australia, warning that it threatened to involve Australia in a catastrophic regional war.

The comments amplify points that Keating has made repeatedly over the past 18 months.

Keating states certain basic truths that are almost entirely suppressed in official political and media discussion. For years, Australian politicians and the media have been in a frenzy, accusing China of all manner of sins, including regional “aggression,” violation of the “international rules-based order” and attempts to dominate Indo-Pacific nations.

In contrast, Keating noted the real dynamic of the growing war threat in the Indo-Pacific, involving the attempts of an American imperialism in decline to maintain its hegemony through a build-up against China. As someone in a position to know such things, having been at the apex of the Australian state, he outlined the logic of this drive, which is towards a major war.

At the same time, Keating’s interventions underscore the bankruptcy of a layer of ruling class critics of AUKUS. Their differences are entirely tactical, centring on the potentially catastrophic consequences for Australian capitalism of a war with China, which remains its major trading partner. Increasingly marginalised, such critics advance no clear alternative and, as is the case with Keating, propose only a more “independent” military expansion.

Keating’s latest interview coincided with Australia-US Ministerial Consultations in Washington last week. The Labor government and the Biden administration outlined expanded US basing arrangements in Australia across all domains—air, sea and land.

On Thursday, the day of the interview, US President Joe Biden revealed in a letter to Congress an updated AUKUS agreement providing for the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology to Australia, crucial to its acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. He revealed that the deal included unspecified “political commitments” from the Labor government.

Keating responded by declaring: “We completely lose our strategic autonomy, the right of Australian governments and the Australian people to determine where and how they respond in the world is taken away if we let the United States and its military displace our military and our foreign policy prerogatives.”

He claimed that Australia was compelled to defend itself by virtue of its membership in AUKUS, when it would otherwise face no threats. “We are better being left alone than we are being ‘protected’ by an aggressive power like the United States,” Keating said.

The incredulous interviewer, Sarah Ferguson, ignoring the past 30 years of unending American militarism, demanded to know how Keating could describe the US as an “aggressive power.”

In response, the former PM stated that Washington was attempting “to superintend from the Atlantic, the largest Asian power, which is China, with four times its population, an economy 20 percent larger, a navy of the same size… That is 9,000 kilometers from the California coast… They’re going to knock them into line.”

Much of Keating’s remarks focussed on Taiwan. It has been deliberately inflamed as a potential flashpoint for war with China by successive US administrations.

Biden, extending upon deepening ties with Taipei established by his predecessors, has actively called into question the previous One China policy, under which the US effectively recognised the Chinese Communist Party regime as the sole government of all China, including Taiwan. China in turn has warned that any move to Taiwanese independence would provoke a military response.

Keating likened the US promotion of Taiwanese nationalism to an attempt by a foreign power to encourage the secession of Tasmania, Australia’s southern island state. He noted that the US would not tolerate aggressive Chinese naval activities in the Gulf of California, but regularly

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conducts them near China's coastline.

Pointing to the chilling implications of the US attempts to goad China into a war, Keating asked: "Does anyone want their kids to be shot to death on a sandy beach in Taiwan? This is the outcome of such a policy."

In his concluding comments on the broader purpose of AUKUS, Keating presented Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, slated to arrive from the US in the early 2030s as secondary. Instead, he claimed that the central purpose of the pact was to "lock" Australia into a US military build-up over decades, including through "American bases all around Australia."

Keating's remarks touched a raw nerve. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese noted that Keating's tenure as PM ended more than two decades ago, and declared: "The world has changed between 1996 and 2024."

Ferguson asked Nancy Pelosi to respond to Keating's comments. The senior US Democratic Party politician and former House speaker denounced his comments on Taiwan being "Chinese real estate" as "stupid" and "ridiculous." In 2022, Pelosi created sharp tensions across the Taiwan Strait with her provocative visit to Taipei that deliberately undermined the One China policy.

Notwithstanding some of the obvious truths he raised, Keating's comments were shot through with contradictions. For instance, he condemned the Albanese government as having betrayed "Labor values" through its embrace of AUKUS and US aggression in the region.

As prime minister, however, Keating supported US militarism globally, including in the Indo-Pacific. There is no record of his having criticised, let alone opposed the US-Australia alliance while he was in office. In reality, the actions of Albanese and his colleagues are entirely in line with Labor's more than 100-year record as a party of imperialist war.

Keating likewise cannot explain why AUKUS and the war drive against China enjoy the support of the overwhelming majority of the Australian political establishment and ruling elite.

As with his own US-aligned prime ministership, the answer lies in the historical development of Australian imperialism. As a middle-order power, Australia has always prosecuted its own predatory interests, especially in the South Pacific, in alliance with the dominant power of the day, first Britain and then with the opening of the Pacific theatre in World War II, the United States. It was the Labor government of John Curtin that oversaw that wartime switch, which was consolidated by the post-war Labor administration of Ben Chifley.

That relationship has underlain the support of all governments, including Labor administrations, for US militarism ever since. The alliance has, over the course of decades, entailed the ever-greater integration of the US and Australian national security establishments. While China remains Australia's largest trading partner, in an epoch where finance capital is dominant, the US is the largest source of direct foreign investment.

The war drive in the Indo-Pacific, moreover, cannot be viewed in isolation. It is part of a global eruption of militarism, fuelled by the decline of American imperialism and the deepening crisis of world capitalism. Increasingly, aggression against China is viewed in Washington as one theatre of a developing global conflict, including the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and preparations for war with Iran, and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Keating simply says nothing about these wars.

It is not evident what Keating exactly is advocating. His comments are clearest when exposing the reality of the US war drive, but decidedly hazy when it comes to what he is proposing. Asked by Ferguson if Australia should do nothing in the way of military expansion, Keating declared he was in favour of acquiring conventional submarines, underwater drones and a host of materiel that would inevitably be used in aggressive conflicts, including war with China.

Keating's positions are a nationalist dead end, that in no way represent opposition to militarism and war. Politically, they serve to line workers and young people up with the ruling elite and to promote Australian nationalism, covering over Australia's character of an imperialist power.

The only way to fight the looming threat of war is on an independent class basis. That means linking the developing social struggles of the working class with the fight against militarism and all of its proponents, including the Labor government. What is required is an international anti-war movement, uniting workers globally on the basis of a socialist perspective directed against the source of war, the capitalist system itself.

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