

“China is Not a Threat”. A Sane Voice Amidst the Madness. Former Australian PM Paul Keating

By [Joe Lauria](#)

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Former Australian PM Paul Keating has eviscerated Australia’s deal to buy nuclear submarines from the U.K. and U.S., saying there is no Chinese threat to defend against, despite the war hysteria stirring in Australia, writes Joe Lauria.

Paul Keating, a former prime minister of Australia, has boldly contested the establishment consensus that Australia needs to spend A\$368 billion to buy nuclear submarines as protection against a China Keating bluntly says is not a threat.

The former Labor premier has defied the conventional wisdom, saying the U.S. opposes China only because Beijing has committed “the high sin in internationalism – it has grown as large as the United States,” a fact the “exceptional state” can’t accept. By subordinating itself, Australia is forfeiting its sovereignty to rely on Britain, which abandoned its former colony years ago, to build nuclear submarines that serve U.S. — and not Australian — interests.

“China does not present and cannot present as an orthodox threat to the United States. By orthodox, I mean an invasive threat,” Keating said in a [speech](#) to the Australian National Press Club on Wednesday. He said:

“The United States is protected by two vast oceans, with friendly neighbours north and south, in Canada and Mexico. And the United States possesses the greatest arsenal in all human history. There is no way the Chinese have ever intended to attack the United States and it is not capable of doing so even had it contemplated it. So, why does the United States and its Congress insist that China is a ‘threat’?”

The US Defence department’s own annual report to Congress in late 2022 said ‘the PRC aims to restrict the United States from having a presence on China’s periphery’. In other words, China aims to keep US navy ships off its coast. Shocking.

Imagine how the US would react if China's blue water navy did its sightseeing off the coast of California. The US would be in a state of apoplexy."

Keating said China is integrated into the international system as a member of the World Trade Organization, the IMF, the World Bank, the G20 and other organizations and has a "vested interest in globalization."

"China is a world trading state - it is not about upending the international system," said Keating. "It is not the old Soviet Union. It is not seeking to propagate some competing international ideology."

The former prime minister said "a sensible American" like Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski would celebrate the fact "you had turned up a co-stabilising power in Asia. ... But no. China is to be circumscribed. It has committed the mortal sin, the high sin in internationalism - it has grown as large as the United States."

"Nowhere in the American playbook," Keating said, "is there provision for this affront to be explained or condoned for the exceptional State to be co-partnered, let alone challenged." Keating is merely quoting the Pentagon itself, whose strategy is to not countenance any power that challenges U.S. "primacy."

Thus the U.S. didn't "see itself as the 'balancing power'" in East Asia, he said, but the "'primary strategic power'. Its geostrategic priority is to contain China militarily and economically."

This means that if 1.4 billion Chinese do not keep their place, the U.S., "will shut them in - contain them ... with the complicity of a reliable bunch of deputy sheriffs, Japan, Korea, Australia and India," said Keating.

"We are now part of a containment policy against China," he said. "The Chinese government doesn't want to attack anybody. They don't want to attack us ... We supply their iron ore which keeps their industrial base going, and there's nowhere else but us to get it. Why would they attack? They don't want to attack the Americans ... It's about one matter only: the maintenance of U.S. strategic hegemony in East Asia. This is what this is all about."

China's new foreign minister, Qin Gang, warned this week the U.S. is heading for "conflict and confrontation" with Beijing because of America's "suppression and containment." China has "worked out what the U.S. game plan is," Keating said. "So, the ball game has begun."

Just like in Afghanistan and Iraq, if it all goes wrong, he said, the U.S. "will just pull out and leave the mess behind. They will go back to San Diego, 10,000 km, and leave us with the consequences."

Watch Keating's full remarks from Wednesday:



[Click image to see video](#)

Labor Party Not Spared

Keating went a step further, taking aim at his own party and its leaders. He said scathingly:

“The Albanese Government’s complicity in joining with Britain and the United States in a tripartite build of a nuclear submarine for Australia under the AUKUS arrangements represents the worst international decision by an Australian Labor government since the former Labor leader, Billy Hughes, sought to introduce conscription to augment Australian forces in World War One.

Every Labor Party branch member will wince when they realise that the party we all fight for is returning to our former colonial master, Britain, to find our security in Asia – two hundred and thirty-six years after Europeans first grabbed the continent from its Indigenous people.”

The Labor Party, he said, bought into a “unity ticket” with the right-wing Liberal Party that supports the U.S. “dominating East Asia – but not as the balancing power to all the other states, including China, but as the primary strategic power.” This happened not because the U.S. is “resident in the metropolitan zone of Asia but on a continent of its own, 10,000 kilometres away – the other side of the world.”

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese “thought a gigantic shift of this kind deserved less than twenty-four hours’ analysis – notwithstanding the huge implications for sovereignty, for the budget, for manufacturing and relations with the region – and of course, with China,” said Keating. He added:

“The Prime Minister is proud to buy submarines that will forever remain within the operational remit of the United States or now, of Britain – with technology owned and dependent on US management – in fact, buying a fleet of nuclear submarines which will forever be an adjunct to the Navy of the United States – whether commanded by an Australian national or not.”

Just dropping the word “sovereignty” into every sentence that Albanese utters “like a magic talisman does not make it real,” Keating said. There’s been no White Paper, no major ministerial or prime ministerial statement to “explain to the Australian people what exactly is the threat we are supposedly facing and why nuclear submarines costing more than any national project since Federation were the best way to respond to such a threat.”

Keating said: “Signing the country up to the foreign proclivities of another country – the United States, with the gormless Brits, in their desperate search for relevance, lunging along behind is not a pretty sight.” He called Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles “unwise ministers” for going along with the bi-partisan submarine scheme.

Australia was playing the sucker regarding that agreement, said Keating. Monday’s meeting of the U.S., British and Australian leaders announcing the submarine deal was a “kabuki show in San Diego,” he said. “There were three people there but only one payer: The Australian prime minister.”

Joe Biden and Richi Sunak “could barely conceal their joy with A\$368 billion heading their way to their defence companies – in the U.K., BAE Systems, in the U.S. its east coast submarine shipyards. No wonder they were smiling, and the band was playing.”



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, U.S. President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at a press event for AUKUS in San Diego, March 13, 2023. (DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley)

The nuclear subs are designed to attack in China’s waters which are defended with the most sensors, Keating said. “No Australian nuclear submarine could have more than a token military impact against China, using as is planned, conventional weaponry,” he said. “In short, a plan to spend around \$368 billion, for nuclear submarines to conduct operations against China in the most risky of conditions, is of little military benefit to anybody, even to the Americans.”

There's nothing remarkable about Keating's comments as he's speaking the plain truth. But in the current political climate, it has unsurprisingly been condemned as heresy.

Keating is speaking in a political culture in which people in public life aren't required to find out what they really think about an issue and then express it, but only what is expedient to say to advance their interests and careers. This defines what motivates the politicians and journalists who are condemning Keating.

Attacks a Servile Media

In his hour-long interview Wednesday with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's presenter Laura Tingle, Keating personally attacked mainstream journalists at the press club who have been dangerously ratcheting up tensions with China.

The Sydney Morning Herald and *The Age* this month ran a three-part [series](#) headlined: "Red Alert: Australia 'must prepare' for threat of China war." Keating had [called](#) it "the most egregious and provocative news presentation of any newspaper I have witnessed in over 50 years of active public life." It was based on the views of five hand-picked China hawks who are promoting a coming war with Beijing.

One of the journalists of the *Herald* and *Age* newspaper series, Matthew Knott, tried to ask a question from the press club to Keating who was in a studio in Sydney. "You have a tremendous skill for invective and criticism; could I ask you now to turn some of that to the Chinese Communist Party and its treatment of Uyghurs ... and pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. ... Will you be similarly critical of them as you are of your own party and journalists?"

"After what you co-wrote with [Peter] Hartcher last week in that shocking presentation in the *Herald*... you should hang your head in shame," Keating responded. "I'm surprised you even have the gall to stand up in public and ask such a question, frankly. You ought to do the right thing and drum yourself out of Australian journalism." He added: "*The Sydney Morning Herald* is a newspaper without integrity. If I were you mate, I'd hide my face and never appear again."

Regarding the Uyghurs, Keating asked rhetorically what Australia would say if China asked about deaths in custody of aboriginals in Australia's prison system. "Wouldn't that be a valid point for them?" he asked. "Great power diplomacy cannot be about reaching into the low social entrails of these states any more than they can with us."

He then laid into Andrew Probyn of the ABC, telling him: "You can't impute threat, meaning invasion, with putting a tariff on wine, or maybe you are silly enough to think that? ... China does not threaten Australia, has not threatened Australia, does not intend to threaten Australia. You can have all the commercial rows you'd like."

He said Probyn's question lacked context. China imposed tariffs after Marise Payne, the former foreign minister, whom he called "the great non-minister of our time," said she wanted weapons-type inspections in the Wuhan lab regarding the origin of the Covid virus. "So you can't put a question without context," he said. "I mean contextualization may not be your long suit."

Keating rebuffed a question from Probyn about China conducting cyber attacks. "What, you think the Americans and the Russians aren't into cyber attacks? Who in the world is not into

cyber attacks? Or do you think we are not?" He accused the "dopes" in Australian intelligence of tapping the phones of Australian allies in Indonesia. "This is what states get up to if you let the security agencies, these ning nongs, get control," he said.

Olivia Caisley of Sky News introduced the idea that Keating was "out of touch" because "unlike present players" he had not had a military briefing on China since the mid 1990s and didn't see China's intimidation even when he was in office. "Why are you so sure China is not a military threat to Australia?" she asked.

"Because I've got a brain, principally," Keating responded.

"And I can think. And I can read. I mean why would China want to threaten Australia? What would be the point? They get the iron ore, the coal, the wheat ... why would China want to occupy Sydney and Melbourne? And could they ever do it? So you don't need a briefing from the dopey security agencies in Canberra to tell you that. I know you are trying to ask a question, but the question is so dumb it's hardly worth an answer. You know Sky News, you've got to dust up your reputation and you're probably doing your best to do that."

Ben Westcott of Bloomberg asked, "Shouldn't Australia work with a partner like the U.S. to protect trade in the region?" Keating told him the U.S. Congress has refused to ratify the U.N.'s Law of the Sea, "so that puts a pretty big hole in that question." China can't find an alternative supply of iron ore than Australia, he said.

"You think they don't want that? Do you think we need the American military at the Pentagon to make sure our iron ore boats go to China? It's a wonder they don't have a welcome for us every day when these damned things turn up. ... Why would China want to interrupt their capacity to deal with us? Why would we need some donkey in Washington to help us?"

Jess Malcom of *The Australian* asked: "Who is being more provocative, Australia or China?" Keating said: "What the Chinese do in building a fleet is not provocation. Why do you use the word 'provocation'? That's the wrong word to be using. They're a major state, they have an economy bigger than the United States. ... So why would you think it is a provocation for a great state like China to build a navy? The question is invalid."

The Counterattack



U.S. Secretary of State Blinken meets with Albanese and Wong in Melbourne Australia, on Feb. 11, 2022. (State Department/Ron Przysucha/ Public Domain)

In the face of his stinging critique of Australian leaders and journalists for putting the nation at risk with its ill-conceived submarine subservience to the U.S. and Britain, Keating sustained withering counterattacks. Rather than listen to him as an elder statesman, the way most societies throughout history have listened to their elders, he was condemned as yesterday's man who had lost touch with the world today.

Wong, the foreign minister, said: "Keating has his views, but in substance and in tone they belong to another time. We don't face the region of 30 years ago. We don't face a region that we hope we had. We face the region of today and we have to work to ensure the region we want for the future."

In an [editorial](#), the *Herald* likewise said, "The world has changed since Keating was PM. Unfortunately, he hasn't." Knox, the *Herald* journalist who received Keating's withering criticism at the press club, wrote in an opinion [piece](#) that "Ex-PMs' perks should come with a compulsory vow of silence."

"I think it is unfortunate that Mr Keating chose such a very strong personal statement against people," Albanese [told](#) an Australian radio interviewer. "I don't think that does anything other than diminish him, frankly. But that's a decision that he's made." Albanese dismissed as "absurd" Keating's charge that Australia's sovereignty is at stake.

Another former prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, [thinks](#) the submarine deal undermines Australia's sovereignty too. "While this will, in time, enhance our naval capabilities it will be seen as making us even more dependent on the United States and now the United Kingdom," he said. "Australian sovereignty will be perceived to have been diminished."

Keating's frontal attack against the government's China policy is splitting the ruling Labor Party. The party's branch in Albanese's Sydney district has passed a motion telling the

government to get out of the coalition with Britain and the U.S. “AUKUS undermines Australian sovereignty and our relations with our Asia-Pacific neighbours. Australia should also abandon plans for a nuclear submarine fleet,” said the motion.

Two Australian trades unions, the Maritime Union of Australia and the Electrical Trades Union, have come out against the submarine agreement as well.

The fate of the deal may hinge on how the Australian public [reacts](#) to the inevitable austerity that will be imposed on it to pay for the submarines.

US & UK Media Reaction

Meanwhile, the establishment media in the U.S. and Britain has almost completely ignored Keatings’ remarks. *The Washington Post* ran an AP [story](#), *The Hill* ran a short [piece](#) quoting the AP, *The New York Times* did not publish a word. In Britain, the BBC and *Financial Times* ignored Keating. Both [The Daily Telegraph](#) and *The Times*, unsurprisingly, [focused](#) only on his criticism of Britain. *The Times* wrote:

“‘Signing the country up to the foreign proclivities of another country — the United States, with the gormless Brits, in their desperate search for relevance, lunging along behind is not a pretty sight,’ Paul Keating, the combative former Labor prime minister told the National Press Club. ...

Keating described Australia’s new reliance on Britain and [Sunak](#) for its defence as ‘deeply pathetic’. The UK, he said, is ‘looking around for suckers’ to create ‘global Britain . . . after that fool [Boris] Johnson destroyed their place in Europe’.

‘We’re returning [to] Rishi Sunak, for God’s sake — Rishi Sunak — for Australia to find our security in Asia. I mean, how deeply pathetic is that,’ Keating, 79, added. ... He ridiculed President Biden for ‘hardly [being able to] keep three coherent sentences together’.

He added: ‘Let’s remember about the British. They pulled their grand fleet out of East Asia in 1904. They witnessed the capitulation of Singapore in 1942. They then announced their east of Suez policy in 1968 — in other words, ‘You’re all on your own, you Australians, we’re leaving. We’ll leave you with Singapore, New Zealand and Malaysia’.

‘And in 1973, just to make sure we got the message, they say, ‘Bugger you, we are going into Europe? So no wheat, no wool,’ he added, with reference to exports from Australia.”

King of Barbs

Keating has been known for his sharp wit and barbs against his political opponents since he was prime minister between 1991 and 1995. While he loosened government regulation on parts of the economy during his premiership, Keating was progressive on other matters, including enacting a landmark [Native Title Act](#) to enshrine [Indigenous land rights](#). He also promoted [republicanism](#) by setting up the [Republic Advisory Committee](#).

Oh how I miss Paul Keating. When he was PM, I was highly critical – with good reason. Alas, 8 PMs later, he shines like a bright star in the gutter.

<https://t.co/EphhIB7PFR>

— Yanis Varoufakis (@yanisvaroufakis) [March 15, 2023](#)

After more than two decades in the political wilderness, Keating reemerged a year and a half ago to upset the Australian establishment with blunt talk about what's wrong with Canberra's relations with China and with the United States.

Keating made his first public appearance in 26 years at the Australian National Press Club on Nov. 9, 2021 and proceeded to challenge conventional wisdom by portraying the United States as an aggressor; saying Taiwan is not "vital" to Australia; and that the media was essentially following the line of the intelligence services.

With tensions already rising between the U.S. and China over Taiwan, Keating boldly said, "Taiwan is not a vital Australian interest. We have no alliance with Taipei. There is no piece of paper sitting in Canberra which has an alliance with Taipei. We do not recognize it as a sovereign state - we've always seen it as a part of China." The U.S. has also viewed Taiwan as part of China since 1979.

In 1951, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. signed the ANZUS Pacific Security Treaty, a mutual defense [pact](#). Keating's words about Australia's obligations in the pact seemed lost on the mainstream media at the press club.

"ANZUS commits to consult under an attack on U.S. forces but not an attack *by* U.S. forces," he said. "This is a very important point. My view is Australia should not be drawn into a military engagement over Taiwan, U.S.-sponsored or otherwise."

The concept of the U.S. as an aggressor in a conflict with China is firmly outside the accepted parameters of Western establishment thinking. It comes as a shock to a "public debate [that] is informed by the spooks," Keating said. "Our foreign policy debate now in Canberra is informed by the security agencies, so you are not getting a macro view of China as it really is."

China wants its "front doorstep and its front porch, that is Taiwan, its sea. It doesn't want American naval forces influencing that," Keating said. "It wants access out of its coast into the deeper waters of the Mariana Trench in the Pacific. That's what it's about fundamentally."

In any case, Keating did not see a military crisis over Taiwan. "The only time the Chinese will attack or be involved in Taiwan is if the Americans and the Taiwanese try and declare a change in the status of Taiwan," he said.

Nov. 2021 Press Club appearance:

Australia was in his day as prime minister a "go-to" nation in regional diplomacy, he said. But it had "lost its way" seeking to establish its security "*from* Asia" rather than "*in* Asia." In other words, rather than being an independent player in the region, Australia clings to the U.S.

Australia's most important geo-strategic partner, he said, is Indonesia and its wide

archipelago that arches across its northern approaches. Yet subsequent Australian governments abandoned the relationship with Indonesia to run after Washington, he said.

Britain was of even less use to Australia, Keating added.

Some members of the public applauded Keating's remarks. One commenter on the *Sky News* YouTube channel, which posted the event, said:

"I feel sorry for Mr. Keating for wasting his time and wisdom to this brainwashed bunch. He was trying to educate the people of his country, but the US propaganda machine is too big and powerful, and has gained a powerful grip there, esp. the press, to the point that it is looking at things through US perspective instead of Australia's ... "

Keating acknowledged authoritarian aspects to Chinese leadership and said the U.S. should have some presence in the region. But it was hardly enough to blunt the furious reaction from the Establishment.

Peter Dutton, Australia's extreme right-wing defense minister at the time, reacted harshly, and predictably, to Keating's remarks. In time-honored fashion, Keating was lazily smeared as being unpatriotic for voicing a realistic and critical view of his nation's foreign policy.

Important speech today by former dear leader and Grand Appeaser Comrade Keating where he talks down Australia (yet again)[]

— Peter Dutton (@PeterDutton_MP) [November 10, 2021](#)

Dutton, who is now leader of the opposition Liberal Party, made an appearance of his own at the Press Club five days later in November 2021 to more fully respond to Keating.

Statement by [#PaulKeating](#) in response to Defence Minister Peter Dutton's speech to the National Press Club today. [#auspol pic.twitter.com/MoHJlcOGnd](#)

— Troy Bramston (@TroyBramston) [November 26, 2021](#)

Some of Keating's smarter critics may well know that he's right. All the more reason for them to attack him with "anti-Australian" or "pro-Chinese communist" smears, which are designed to protect their interests and not meant as serious points in a political debate.

His voice is one of reason in a time of war fever. Given the extreme danger in which the world finds itself, with possible world war by the West against Russia and China, Keating cannot be not sounding the alarm loudly enough.

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Featured image: Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating at the National Press Club in Canberra on Wednesday. (ABC screenshot)

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