

Kowtow Keating



FIGURE 1. FORMER AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER PAUL KEATING. IMAGE CREDIT J. BRUNI FROM THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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Former Prime Minister Paul Keating's recent (10 November) address to the National Press Club has been claimed as a tour de force of an Australian elder statesman. The words of a cold-eyed realist in foreign affairs who, while acknowledging the authoritarian tendencies of the People's Republic of China, says that the stakes are too high for Australia not to give the country its dues for having lifted 20 percent of the human population out of poverty and into modernity. Furthermore, he overtly criticised the Morrison government's 'back to the future' foreign and strategic policy positions regarding AUKUS - calling it a return to Australia seeking security from Asia rather than in Asia. And Keating came out swinging against the US-built Virginia-class submarines and was completely dismissive of Britain's Astute class saying they were effectively out-of-date designs and by the time the Royal Australian Navy were to acquire its 'Virginia-class' boats, they'd be completely redundant.



It is always interesting to hear the ruminations of former prime ministers. It's like visiting a museum where hindsight and reflection on the 'golden age' of their terms in office gives them the appearance of relevance. So, let me break down some of Keating's main points to see how relevant he was.

Cold-eyed Realist on the People's Republic

Imagine an alternative universe where the Nazi's conditionally survived World War II. Berlin controlled much of war-ravaged Europe and what the world knew about the inner workings of the Nazi regime. It is highly likely that in this universe allied politicians, scholars and journalists would marvel at Nazi ingenuity for rapidly rebuilding the Reich. They might have heard of slave labour camps and perhaps of the genocide of the Jews, but to integrate post-war Germany among the community of civilised nations, they never pay too much heed to these 'rumours.' Cold-eyed realists would claim that it is in the Allies' interest to accept Nazi Germany to have a stable Euro-Atlantic region. That it is better to have the Nazis raise the living standards of Germans rather than having them live in resentful poverty. And if in this hypothetical alternative universe Britain survived as an independent state, many other allied countries might even excuse the occasional Nazi maritime show of force over the English Channel since in this hypothetical world, it is better to accept these shows of force than to confront them for fear of resuming full-scale hostilities.

Now let's look at those in contemporary Australia who claim the realist position when it comes to accepting the legitimacy of the People's Republic of China.

Yes, the People's Republic of China is not completely analogous to either Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union. However, the PRC is a totalitarian capitalist state. What does this mean? It means that it is no democracy. It uses the central authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to crush internal dissent and propagate an inflated view of Han nationalism - a Chinese vision of racial superiority. It is a revanchist state in that it seeks to reverse what it deems the weaknesses of late Imperial Chinese rule which led to the Century of Humiliation (1849-1949). As the CCP is now 72-years-old it has presided over the modernisation of the Chinese state as well as the transformation of its economy. But this overlooks the dark years under Mao's rule where millions died due to deliberate famine, forced industrialisation and the Cultural Revolution.



FIGURE 2. MAO ZEDONG.
IMAGE CREDIT WIKIMEDIA
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Today we only see what we want to see and that is the miracle of the Chinese Communist Party delivering modernity and gleaming cities, a vast transformation from a poverty-stricken agrarian economy. We see the China as the workshop of the world, delivering cheap manufactured products to the West with an economy second only to the United States. Because of its international and financial power, it is hard for Westerners to question or criticise the PRC and the CCP. We hear rumours of re-education camps in western China where Muslim Uyghurs and Kazakhs are discriminated against and persecuted. Rumours that



include the cultural if not the actual genocide of these Muslim people. We hear rumours of the persecution of Falun Gong, Christians, and other religious minorities within the PRC, but choose not to pay too much attention to them. As for the Tibetans, their conquest is complete and their culture is dying, but no one seems to mind since we in the West have developed our Sino-Western Co-prosperity Sphere where supply chains are so heavily intertwined, it buys our silence in a way neither the Nazis nor the Soviets could have ever imagined. Autonomous Hong Kong is slowly being dismantled and reintegrated into the PRC. What can the West do about this? Nothing. It's an internal Chinese matter.

Aggressive PRC overflights and other mainland maritime transgressions are being conducted against the renegade province of Taiwan. Little is being done about this since the damage to international commerce a war between Taiwan and the mainland in which the West is involved would be too great to contemplate. The states of Southeast Asia are having their claims to the resources of the South China Sea actively contested by a near permanent series of grey zone challenges that they are not prepared or equipped to meet. And then there is the PRC's massive military build-up. If Beijing is committed to a peaceful rise and harmonious commerce, what explains their massive and rapid military build-up?



FIGURE 3. A FLIGHT OF CHINESE J-20 FIGHTERS.
IMAGE CREDIT WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Paul Keating raised none of these issues in a way that underscores the severity of the PRC's challenge to the strategic status quo ante in Asia. He said that if we'd only give Beijing the respect it deserves for having lifted its people out of poverty, if we'd only accept the PRC as it is, he inferred there'd be no more problems with this gigantic totalitarian state. He also said that Australia needs to move away from the idea that the United States is the security guarantor of Asia, something that he considers completely untenable. But if we looked at Keating's foreign policy position while he was Prime Minister, ANZUS was still Australia's central security plank. There was no mention of Australia walking away from its treaty obligations to the United States. Did Keating promote a more activist foreign policy in Asia? Yes, he did. But this could only have happened because the US underwrote Australia's security through ANZUS, not despite it.

Taiwan

According to Keating, "Taiwan is not a vital Australian interest". Taiwan is a vital interest in the world of semi-conductors, the unique types only made in Taiwan without which many everyday electronic items we consume in Australia could not work. Furthermore, the economic interlinkages between the PRC and Taiwan make this inter-China relationship vital. Without stability the likelihood of miscalculation by either one side or the other could turn the Taiwan Strait into a chanel house which will draw in the United States and as a US ally, Australia. Keating also made another point about ANZUS: "ANZUS commits us to consult in the event of an attack on US forces, but not an attack by US forces." What was the former Australian Prime Minister hinting at here? That the US would be the aggressor in any Sino-



American conflict? Furthermore, if Taipei invited US forces to help defend Taiwan and these forces were then attacked by the PRC military or agents on the ground, it would be highly unlikely that any Australian government would refuse to consider assisting US forces. Doing so would break all ties Australia has with the United States and cast Australia adrift in the Indo-Pacific.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen is arguably one of the most independence-minded



FIGURE 4. TSAI ING-WEN.
IMAGE CREDIT WIKIMEDIA
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Taiwanese leaders in recent history. For many years, the bulk of Taiwan's population accepted the reality that one day the mainland and Taiwan would unite. No one wanted this to be achieved by force of arms. But whenever the PRC doubted Taiwan's commitment to One China, Two Systems it strove to intimidate the island back into the fold. It happened in 1995/96 during PRC ballistic missile tests in the waters surrounding Taiwan and it is happening now with increasing military overflights close to Taiwanese territory in a deliberate campaign that began in 2020. And as the PRC continues to ply military pressure on Taipei to demonstrate the futility of altering the One China Two Systems policy, the more average Taiwanese people are favouring independence, backing Tsai Ing-wen. Taken from this position Beijing's military posturing over Taiwan is changing the internal political dynamics of the island against the People's Republic.

Submarines

Keating took a major swipe at the Morrison government for AUKUS. Firstly, he questioned what he believed was an outmoded Cold War containment policy on the PRC especially at a time of declining American power in a statement eerily reminiscent of Chinese premier Xi Jinping's own views of declining American and Western power. He saw Britain's attempt to ingratiate itself in the Asian region as ridiculous saying that "Britain is like an old theme park sliding into the Atlantic compared to modern China. China is going to be huge". Besides ridiculing the British Prime Minister calling him a 'coconut head' and saying that "Well, the Chinese have 63 submarines, how long do you think that aircraft carrier of theirs would have lasted in a real dust-up? Can Britain help us here? No."

As for the meat in the AUKUS sandwich, the proposed construction of 8 nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy, Keating said that they would be useless compared to Chinese naval might and "eight submarines against China when we get the submarines in 20 years' time, it'll be like throwing a handful of toothpicks at a mountain." However, he was extremely complementary of the French low enriched nuclear-powered boats saying they were at the top of the technological ladder. There was another curious point about Keating's position on submarines. That



FIGURE 5. ASTUTE-CLASS NUCLEAR-POWERED
SUBMARINE



the Virginia-class and Astute-class were out of date. This is a strange proposition since neither the US Navy nor the Royal Navy seem to be aware of this fact. They are acquiring these vessels with the idea that they will be relevant to naval warfare for decades to come. Keating also mentioned several times that Australia will be acquiring the Virginia-class. There is no evidence for what type of boat design the RAN will be buying, this being subject to an internal 18-month review, though on available evidence the Astute-class would be a better fit being a smaller boat to the Virginia-class and Australia having a British not an American naval culture.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, there is not enough space in this article to fully unpack everything that Paul Keating said during his address to the National Press Club, suffice to say he reflected fondly upon his time in office when his prime ministership was busy building bridges to Asia. But he also presided over an Australia that was actively encouraging local industry and businesses to pack up from Australia and move to the low-cost labour of the People's Republic. Like the rest of the West, the early 1990s was a time when there was a gold-rush to China. By facilitating Australia's part in this, Keating must be held partly responsible for the very belligerence we are currently encountering. By economically strengthening a totalitarian state, Australia, and the rest of the developed world have directly contributed to our current problems with the CCP and particularly with Xi Jinping. The fact that AUKUS was created had less to do with Australia desiring an 'Anglo' security alliance and more to do with sheltering under allies that we did not have to second-guess. France was a victim of this as much as it was a victim of its own inability to read the Australian mindset. Perhaps the greatest take away from Keating's address is the fact that former prime ministers think a great deal of their past successes and think that their wisdom is eternal.

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