

The National Press Club

AUKUS

Statement by PJ Keating

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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.

That of all things, a contemporary Labor government is shunning security in Asia for security in and within the Anglosphere.

And in an arrangement concocted on the English coast at Cornwall by Scott Morrison, Boris Johnson - one of the great vulgarians of our time – and Joe Biden, Australia is locking in its next half century in Asia as subordinate to the United States, an Atlantic power.

We have been here before: Australia's international interests subsumed by those of our allies. Defence policy substituting for foreign policy. But this time it is a Labor government lining us up.

Anthony Albanese's government has picked up and has taken ownership of the strategic architecture of the Morrison government – but taken it up in full and with unprecedented gusto.

The Morrison government, at great cost, walked away from the French submarine and approached the United States, for Australia to join its nuclear submarine program.

And because Boris Johnson succeeded in dynamiting Britain out of Europe with Brexit – Britain is trawling the world trying to stitch up the new ‘Global Britain’. And guess what? They believe they have turned up a bunch of naïve old comrades in Australia, an accommodating Prime Minister, a conservative defence minister and a risk-averse foreign minister – and all surrounded by a neo-con bureaucracy.

Yet, we approached the United States – not the other way around, on the arguments put to Morrison by the security agencies led by Andrew Shearer and ASPI and as it turns out, without even reference to the Department of Foreign Affairs or its minister. Rather, and remarkably, a Labor government has picked up Shearer’s neo-con proclivities and those of ASPI, a pro-US cell led by a recent former chief of staff to Liberal foreign minister Marise Payne.

And that approach was to have the United States supply nuclear submarines for deep and joint operations against China.

And how did this come to be? And by a Labor government?

The answer lies in Anthony Albanese’s reliance on two seriously unwise ministers. Penny Wong and Richard Marles. Penny Wong took a decision in 2016, five years before AUKUS, not to be at odds with the Coalition on foreign policy on any core issue. You cannot get into controversy as the foreign spokesperson for the Labor Party if you adopt the foreign policy of the Liberal Party – if you are on a unity ticket to deny the Liberals any wedge on foreign policy and defence.

You may stay out of trouble, but you are compromised. Self-compromised.

The cost was that Labor entered a policy depression on Asia – a bit like a low weather trough but in foreign policy. This trough – all five years of it – had Penny Wong and Labor on a unity ticket with Julie Bishop and Marise Payne – a unity ticket which supported the United States dominating East Asia – but not as the balancing power to all the other states, including China, but as the primary strategic power – notwithstanding that the United States was a country not resident in the metropolitan zone of Asia but on a continent of its own, 10,000 kilometres away - the other side of the world.

It was into this policy void, this twilight zone, that Scott Morrison summoned Anthony Albanese, Penny Wong and Richard Marles to unveil his secretly negotiated AUKUS agreement.

In the afternoon of Wednesday 20 September 2021, Morrison gave Labor a confidential briefing on dumping the French submarine to take up the US Virginia class boat and less than 24 hours later Labor adopted the policy unqualifiedly.

Anthony Albanese told Michael Fullilove at the Lowy Institute on 4 March this year – ‘I’m proud of what we did in less than 24 hours’. The Prime Minister 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. 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.

And just dropping the word ‘sovereignty’ into every sentence like a magic talisman does not make it real.

From a clear sovereignty capable of execution by Australia over a French conventionally powered submarine to sovereignty suborned to the whim and caprice of a US administration – that’s where we are now.

More than that, Morrison said his government would reserve twenty months to consider the enormity of the issues. So Labor had the same twenty months of leeway available to it. It could have spent twenty months trawling through the plethora of issues and then announced a considered decision. And, of course, a big one.

But instead, Labor’s valiant three fell immediately into line – they would join the neo-cons in the Office of National Intelligence, ASPI, the country’s principal US apologist, the security agencies and the hapless Defence department. And Morrison, the Member for Cook.

And in the meantime, 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.

And you can understand why. Penny Wong had spent five years rustling not a leaf - and was not about to start. There was to be no khaki election for her. Marles, though well-intentioned, completely captured by the idea of America, couldn't wait to join the pile on.

And the then Opposition leader not ever having displayed any deep or long-term interest in foreign affairs, fell in with Wong and Marles as leader of the great misadventure.

And the Prime Minister tells us, this is something to be proud of.

As someone who has had a share of big issues and over a long time, I can only regard these fateful events, the overnight conversion, as a lack of perceptive capacity in understanding the scale and weight of the issues at hand or more than that, a benign disregard of responsibility. Or both.

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.

The result is that through AUKUS, Australia is providing expensive support to the UK and US defence companies. At yesterday's kabuki show in San Diego, there were three people but only one payer. The Australian Prime Minister. The US President and the UK Prime Minister could barely conceal their joy with A\$368 billion heading the way to their defence companies – in the UK, BAE Systems, in the US its east coast submarine shipyards. No wonder they were smiling, and the band was playing.

But through the policy fog, informed American congressional figures soon realised that the provision of eight Virginia class nuclear submarines would seriously disrupt the US shipyard supply program to the US Navy.

So, conversations and ideas then turned to perhaps the UK building a tripartite-designed submarine for Australia and the United Kingdom itself, instead of one supplied out of the east coast yards of the United States.

The US would remain in the so-called AUKUS, not because it was building submarines for Australia but because it would forever own the nuclear propulsion technology and the fire control systems of any built elsewhere.

So Britain, which removed its battle fleet from East Asia in 1904, surrendered its citadel in Singapore in 1942, adopted its East of Suez policy in 1968, formally walking out on strategic obligations to Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia with its FPDA, the so-called Five Power Defence Agreement – finally dumping us in 1973 following its grand entry into the European Common Market, is now to be rewarded in its long contempt of us by having us fork out for the design of Britain's next Astute class submarine.

That is, we subsidise the design of the next British attack class Astute submarine simply to be able to grab half a dozen for ourselves on the way through.

We find this week, that that grand bargain has been struck.

Australia will buy six to eight nuclear powered submarines. But to deal with the capability gap, the United States will agree to supply between three and five aged Virginia class subs to Australia in the meantime. That is, ahead of any newly designed Astute class boats being delivered to the Australian Navy.

Designed to attack in China's peripheral waters, it is in these waters where China is most advantaged, where its anti-submarine platforms and sensors are most concentrated. And no Australian nuclear submarine could have more than a token military impact against China, using as is planned, conventional weaponry.

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.

The marginal benefit to Australia's own defences is minimal while the cost is maximal – indeed, off the scale. The proposal is irrational in every dimension. And an affront to public administration.

Imagine the complexity of the deal? Participating in the manufacture of a new Astute class boat to be built at Barrow-in-Furness in Britain while porting half a dozen ex-US Virginia class boats in and around Australia and crewing them.

But all this leads into the bigger point. That is, that the United States does not see itself as the 'balancing power' in East Asia but the 'primary strategic power'. Its geostrategic priority is to contain China militarily and economically.

China does not present and cannot present as an orthodox threat to the United States. By orthodox, I mean an invasive threat. 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 Defense 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.

The fact is China is not an outsider. It is part of the international system. It is a member of the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, the G20 and APEC. And has been happy to be.

It has adopted and has a vested interest in globalisation – its President Xi Jinping proselytised for this at Davos six years ago.

China is a world trading state – it is not about upending the international system.

It is not the old Soviet Union. It is not seeking to propagate some competing international ideology.

If you were a sensible American, of the likes of Kissinger or of a Brzezinski, you would celebrate the fact that you had turned up a co-stabilising power in Asia – China. A power with which you could manage both great oceans – the Atlantic and the Pacific.

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 is there provision for this affront to be explained or condoned. For the exceptional State to be co-partnered, let alone challenged.

The 1.4 billion of those Chinese, should keep their place – even if their place is safely land and water locked.

And should they not keep their place we, the United States, will shut them in – contain them – and with the complicity of a reliable bunch of deputy sheriffs, Japan, Korea, Australia and India.

But this week, China's new Foreign Minister Qin Gang said the United States is heading for 'conflict and confrontation' with Beijing – accusing America of engaging in 'suppression and containment'.

And Qin would not have said this without President Xi's express agreement.

President Xi later himself said that the United States and Western countries led by the United States 'have implemented all-round containment, containment and suppression on our country'.

This is not the China Daily saying this, or the Global Times in Beijing, this is the President himself. In other words, the rhetoric from the Chinese side, now they have worked out what the US game plan really is, is now sharper and more assertive.

So, the ball game has begun.

Nominally for the United States, over the future of Taiwan, but really in service of its underlying imperialism.

Taiwan, a territory which became a so-called 'democracy' as late as 1996.

And for this matter to be resolved in the favour of the United States, we are enjoined in Australia by the Hartchers and Jenningses of this world to step up to World War Three.

Indeed, two of our major dailies, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age, have for five years now, argued the notion of war against China. Or readiness for war.

I said at the Press Club in November 2021 that Taiwan is not a vital Australian interest. And it remains not a vital Australian interest.

A vital Australian interest would, for instance, be an invasive attack on Tasmania – that would constitute a vital interest for Australia – but Taiwan, a territory we have never recognised as a State – should not be commensurably considered.

I dare the Prime Minister to explicitly suggest or leave open the question that Australia might go to war over Taiwan – at the urgings of the United States or anyone else.

Before the Prime Minister attended the G20 in Indonesia ahead of his inaugural meeting with Xi Jinping I had an hour's conversation with him at Kirribilli.

Generally, I have found the Prime Minister responsive to calls, texts and email.

But on 2 February 2023, I emailed a long paper to the Prime Minister arguing that the first responsibility of a government to its community was the untrammelled

maintenance of sovereignty – the right to make the right choices for your own country. I received no reply to this correspondence.

More recently, on 21 February, I spoke to a member of the Prime Minister's staff inviting the Prime Minister into a conversation with me ahead of any meeting with the US President and particularly in respect of AUKUS and the submarines. The message was delivered but I heard nothing from the Prime Minister.

So, it is not that anything I say today could not first have been put to the Prime Minister. The fact is, he did not wish to hear the message or have the conversation.

I don't think I suffer from relevance deprivation, but I do suffer concern for Australia as it most unwisely proceeds down this singular and dangerous path.

Unambiguously, unqualifiedly and solely arraiging itself with an Atlantic power which upon any defeat or setback will see that power likely repair to California and with alacrity - ten thousand kilometres across the moat of the Pacific, as it retreated from Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving the scarified locals to deal with the destruction and chaos.

Labor has invariably got the big international ones right.

The Party knocked over Hughes when he sought to conscript young men to serve in Belgium in World War One.

Curtin knocked over Churchill when Churchill sought to ship our troops from Tobruk to Burma. In a clear exercise of sovereignty, Curtin brought the troops home to defeat the Japanese marines in Kokoda and Milne Bay.

Arthur Calwell valiantly, and correctly, opposed Australian military participation in the war in Vietnam – a national disaster for us and especially for the Americans.

Simon Crean, as leader, firmly opposed Howard's commitment to Iraq - a commitment which led to tragic consequences for the Iraqi people and ourselves, and again, for the Americans – friends, we again failed to properly warn as to the folly of their adventurism.

This one, AUKUS, is where Labor breaks its winning streak of now over a century. Falling into a major mistake, Anthony Albanese, befuddled by his own small target election strategy, emerges as Prime Minister with an American sword to rattle at the neighbourhood to impress upon it the United States's esteemed view of its untrammelled destiny.

Naturally, I should prefer to be singing the praises of the government in all matters but these issues carry deadly consequences for Australia and I believe, it is incumbent on any former Prime Minister, particularly now, a Labor one, to alert the country to the dangerous and unnecessary journey on which the government is now embarking.

This week, Anthony Albanese screwed into place the last shackle in the long chain the United States has laid out to contain China.

No mealy-mouthed talk of 'stabilisation' in our China relationship or resort to softer or polite language will disguise from the Chinese the extent and intent of our commitment to United States's strategic hegemony in East Asia with all its deadly portents.

History will be the judge of this project in the end. But I want my name clearly recorded among those who say it is a mistake. Who believe that, despite its enormous cost, it does not offer a solution to the challenge of great power competition in the region or to the security of the Australian people and its continent.

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