

Former Labor foreign minister warns that AUKUS means Australian involvement in war with China

Oscar Grenfell
18 September 2024

A debate in ruling circles over AUKUS has again flared with former Labor Foreign Minister Gareth Evans branding the militarist pact with the US and the UK as a threat to “Australian sovereignty” that ensures the country would be a nuclear target in the event of a war in the Indo-Pacific.

Evans began denouncing AUKUS last month in an address to the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia Conference. His comments aligned with positions advanced for some time by former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating and Foreign Minister Bob Carr.

On the third anniversary of AUKUS, which falls this week, proponents of the war drive against China in the national-security establishment have publicly condemned the trio of “Labor elders” as being out of touch and behind the times. Evans has responded on their behalf.

Evans, Carr and Keating are all committed defenders of Australian imperialism, with their own longstanding and deep ties to the national-security establishment. They speak for a wing of the ruling elite itself, deeply fearful of the economic and political implications of unconditional commitment to a US-led war against China, which remains Australia’s largest trading partner.

Evans’ intervention is notable from several standpoints. His comments, and the establishment debate, underscore the imminent dangers of a catastrophic war that are usually concealed from the population. They also demonstrate the highly conditional character of the criticisms of AUKUS made by this layer of the political establishment, which in no way represents opposition to war, imperialism or even the US-Australia alliance.

In his August speech, Evans had warned that the AUKUS pact for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, beginning with the sale of three US Virginia-class vessels early next decade, was predicated on Australia committing to join a US-led war with China.

He noted the “ever-clearer expectation on the US side that ‘integrated deterrence’ means Australia will have no choice but to join the US in fighting any future war in which it chooses to engage anywhere in the Indo-Pacific, including in defence of

Taiwan.”

Evans added: “It defies credibility to think that, in the absence of that last understanding, the Virginia transfers will ever proceed. The notion that we will retain any kind of sovereign agency in determining how all these assets are used, should serious tensions erupt, is a joke in bad taste.”

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper, which is particularly hawkish in its promotion of Australia’s alignment with the US war drive, last week featured the comments of AUKUS proponents, responding to the “Labor elders.”

Peter Dean, a director of the University of Sydney’s US Studies Centre, which is part funded by the American government, declared that Evans, Keating and Carr were “claiming... an elaborate conspiracy theory. They are asking people to ignore the statements of their own government about us having sovereign control of those (submarine) capabilities.”

Dean was an author of last year’s Defence Strategic Review, commissioned by the Labor government, which recommended a vast expansion of the Australian military, and particularly its strike capabilities, to ensure that it could engage in “impactful projection” throughout the region.

Mike Pezzulo, the former secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, said that AUKUS did not entail the abandonment of Australian “sovereignty,” but a “pooling of sovereignty” with the US and other allies directed against purported Chinese belligerence.

In his reply, published in the *Australian* on Tuesday, Evans repeated and amplified the points he had made previously.

Evans wrote that the “price for the US for giving us access to its nuclear propulsion technology” had become “indefensibly high.” As a result of the accompanying “integration” and “interoperability” of US and Australian forces, several Australian basing facilities were now “potential nuclear targets” in the event of a war.

Evans drew attention to the Stirling naval base in Perth. Long before Australia acquires nuclear-powered submarines, it is being transformed into a hub for the American submarine fleet. Increasingly frequent visits are already underway, and Stirling is slated to become a semi-permanent US basing port by 2027,

making it a key American asset in the Indian Ocean.

Evans also named the Pine Gap spy base, which over recent years has been expanded by a third, the largest development in its history. Independent analysts have described it as a key hub of US nuclear war planning, from which strikes on Chinese nuclear missile silos would be targeted. He noted the North West Cape facility, which provides radio communication for US and Australian naval forces throughout the western Pacific Ocean and eastern Indian Ocean. The Tindal air base in the Northern Territory is being “upgraded” to accommodate US B-52 bombers, which can carry nuclear weapons.

This information, pointing to Australia’s transformation into what US officials have described as a “central base of operations” for American activities against China, is generally covered over, because of the opposition it would provoke from ordinary people.

Evans, while highlighting these realities, offered no alternative. “The issue that most troubles me, Keating and Carr in all of this... is what we see as the loss of Australian sovereign independence that’s necessarily involved,” he stated.

These references to “sovereignty” underscore the key concern of this layer. They do not necessarily oppose Australian participation in a war with China, but they wish for the ruling elite to be able to decide on it when the time comes. AUKUS, and the associated turn to “interoperability,” they are warning, means that Australia would automatically and immediately be engaged in such a war, without its imperialist politicians having the opportunity to weigh the costs and advantages.

Evans’ other points show again that the official AUKUS critics speak for ruling-class interests. They question whether AUKUS will provide the best means of advancing Australian imperialism’s own predatory interests in the Indo-Pacific.

For instance, Evans warned that the promised US submarines may never arrive, and complained that by the time they do, their advantages, such as limited “detectability,” may have been compromised by technological developments. The vast cost of AUKUS, moreover, would “make much harder the acquisition of other capabilities—in particular, state-of-the-art missiles, aircraft and drones—arguably even more important than submarines for any kind of self-reliant capacity.”

That is, the “Labor elders” are proposing a slight variant on what would still be a massive military build-up. Each of them has militarist credentials that they have never repudiated. Keating and Evans were senior members of the Hawke government, which joined the first Gulf War against Iraq in 1991. Carr, a US embassy informant since the 1970s, was foreign minister from 2012 to 2013 in the Labor government that aligned Australia with a vast US “pivot to Asia” directed against China, of which AUKUS is the logical culmination.

As the AUKUS proponents have noted, moreover, the “Labor elders” all served in governments that protected Pine Gap, which has always been involved in global US military

operations and has consequently always been a potential nuclear target.

The fact that Keating, Carr and Evans are speaking out now testifies to a degree of alarm within segments of the ruling elite, over the trajectory of the war drive and its rapidity. China remains far and away Australia’s largest trading partner, accounting for 27 percent of total trade last year. Open war with Beijing would trigger an economic meltdown, jeopardise the fortunes of the country’s ultra-wealthy and provoke social upheaval.

That last issue is undoubtedly a factor in the campaigning of the “Labor elders.” Each of their decades-long political careers has been bound up with the suppression of the working class and of social opposition. They are well aware that war has been a central driver of social and political opposition from the working class, including in the two world wars and Vietnam, when they began their political careers.

In addition to sounding a warning to the ruling class, the posturing of these forces serves as a safety-valve for such opposition. The “Labor elders” are seeking to divert hostility to AUKUS and war in the direction of Australian nationalism and militarism. They are covering up the fact that, as a middle-order imperialist power, the Australian ruling elite has always prosecuted its own predatory interests in alliance with the dominant power of the day, first Britain and then the US.

Above all, the trio, as lifelong defenders of capitalism, are concealing the reality that war is the inevitable product of the profit system and its historic breakdown.

The war drive against China is one component of a developing global war, including the US-NATO conflict with Russia in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza and the moves towards a regionwide Middle Eastern war targeting Iran. This cannot be fought on a national basis, in alliance with segments of the ruling class, but only through a political struggle against them.

What is required is not an “independent” Australian foreign policy, but an independent perspective for the working class. That means uniting workers internationally in a common struggle against war, imperialism and capitalism in the fight for world socialism.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact