

When an experienced ambassador to China speaks on AUKUS, we should listen

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A revamped AUKUS [agreement](#) has just been tabled in Parliament. Over the past few years, there have been no shortage of critics of the nuclear submarine deal with the US and UK, and there have been many ways of persuading the public that it is a bad idea.

One particularly relatable approach, likely to reach young people, comes from Greens foreign affairs spokesperson David Shoebridge in the form of a two-minute [TikTok](#). Likening Australia's buying of US submarines to Australians buying second hand American-made cars, Shoebridge vividly evokes the essence of the deal.

Senior Labor figures, on the other hand, have taken advantage of their status to voice their views, often delivered in colourful, punchy metaphors that are readymade for headlines. Former prime minister Paul Keating said the British must have seen us as 'suckers', describing AUKUS as the '[worst deal in all history](#)' and saying it will turn Australia into the [51st state](#) of the US. And former foreign affairs minister Bob Carr described AUKUS as '[fragrant, methane-wrapped bullshit](#)'.

The most recent attack came from another former Labor foreign minister, Gareth Evans, who called AUKUS '[a joke in bad taste](#)'. He also said that Defence Minister Richard Marles' 'love for the US' was 'so dewy-eyed as to defy parody'.

Evans made these remarks in a two-day [symposium](#) titled 'AUKUS: Assumptions and Implications', which was held at the Australian National University last week. Twenty speakers from universities, think tanks and the media spoke on various aspects of the submarine deal, including the bureaucratic and political processes necessary for its success, the military capability it promises, its implications for nuclear non-proliferation, and its probable economic and social consequences.

Organised by the Academy of Social Sciences and led by a handful of senior scholars including Hugh White, the conference opened with an hour-long keynote from Ross Garnaut, who, among many other roles, was the principal economic adviser to former prime minister Bob Hawke and was Australia's ambassador to China from 1985 to 1988. As an economist, Garnaut has built his career around the analysis and practice of policy connected to development, economics and international relations in Australia, Asia and the Pacific.

Garnaut's contribution to the conference was to provide context for the discussion of AUKUS. Unlike the politicians quoted above, he did not criticise the deal directly, instead taking the audience on a historical journey. He told the story of how Australia learnt, through trial and error, to live in a region marked by racial, cultural and political diversity, and to project its interests and values on the global stage.

Featuring prominently was an account of how our initial loyalty to the UK and our later alliance with the US informed our trade, defence and foreign policies vis-à-vis Australia's Asian and Pacific neighbours. His wide-ranging speech was not intended to generate attention-grabbing headlines or soundbites. But what he said – drawing on his six decades of thinking and experience – warrants careful attention and reflection.

Garnaut said his work has informed him that Australia *can* be an effective sovereign nation as a democracy while geographically situated in a region with 'differences in cultures, political institutions and economic strengths'. But to achieve this requires Australia to look to the future, where other large Asian states such as Indonesia and India as well as China will become much more important to Australia than the US – 'while China is likely to increase its economic and strategic weight relative to the US for a number of years, it will soon go beyond the peak of its relative weight against the other large states of Asia'.

Hence, he cautioned Australia against putting all its eggs in the basket of a US hell-bent on preserving its supremacy: 'There is no future for our two peoples and there may be no future for humanity unless our US ally can get used to being one of several powerful states in a world that allows primacy to none of them.'

Garnaut explained the importance of seeing the Taiwan issue in a historical context, as we worked out how to position ourselves vis-à-vis the US:

In a changing world, one thing that doesn't change is that any government in China will be determined never to allow Taiwan to emerge as an independent state ... We want the people on Taiwan to live under a political system as close as possible to that preferred by most of them. Ultimately this will be worked through by Chinese on the mainland and in Taiwan. Friends of the US need to explain to Americans who think they have the people of Taiwan's welfare guiding them, that it is dangerous to encourage thoughts of independence.

As a former diplomat in China with an intimate understanding of China's political rhetoric and behaviour, Garnaut was also keen to stress a point that has eluded many commentators about China's intentions regarding Taiwan, explaining that it is a 'dangerous mistake' to interpret China's longstanding refusal to rule out the use of force to prevent Taiwan's independence 'as an indication of its willingness to use military force against other states'.

These ruminations about Australia's past lead listeners to question the claim that AUKUS is in our national interest. Garnaut asks, 'Is AUKUS consistent with the preservation of Australian sovereign independence in future decisions on war and peace?'

Garnaut is certain that should Australia end up being involved in a war over Taiwan, the consequences will be perilous:

America would be damaged by war with China over the status of Taiwan, but, short of a major nuclear exchange debilitating both great powers, its sovereignty would not be at risk. Australia's would be. Indeed, I doubt that Australia could survive as a sovereign entity the isolation from most of Asia that would be likely to follow anything other than a decisive and quick US victory in a war in which our military was engaged.

When a man such as Ross Garnaut speaks, it would be foolish not to listen.

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