

Paul Keating attacks media for 'pious belchings' over China

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Former prime minister Paul Keating has launched a scathing attack on the Australian media for its coverage of China, denouncing “the nominally pious belchings of ‘do-gooder’ journalists” who live on leaks from security agencies.

Keating told Australian newspaper’s strategic forum on Monday: “The Australian media has been recreant in its duty to the public in failing to present a balanced picture of the rise, legitimacy and importance of China”.

Instead it preferred “to traffic in side plays dressed up with cosmetics of sedition and risk”.

His attack comes amid debate about [China’s refusal of visas to two members of federal parliament](#), Andrew Hastie and senator James Paterson, who have been strong critics of the Beijing’s regime.

Current relations between the Chinese and Australian governments have been strained for some time, with a range of tension points, including the issue of Chinese interference in Australian politics and universities and the government’s response.

In his speech Keating once again had in his sights what he sees as the sway of security agencies in foreign policy especially on China, a point he made forcefully before the election.

“What passes for the foreign policy of Australia lacks any sense of strategic realism,” he said. “The whispered word ‘communism’ of old, is now being replaced with the word ‘China’.

“The reason we have ministries and cabinets is that a greater and collective wisdom can be brought to bear on complex topics – and particularly on movements of tectonic importance.

“This process is not working in Australia, ” he said.

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"The subtleties of foreign policy and the elasticity of diplomacy are being supplanted by the phobias of a group of national security agencies which are now effectively running the foreign policy of the country.

"And the media has been up to its ears in it."

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He targeted particularly The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age for their China coverage.

"Drops to journalists by the [security] agencies about another 'seditious' publication in a particular university or the hijinks of another Chinese entrepreneur is passed off as the evil bearing of the Chinese State."

He said he did not know how Scott Morrison and the government permitted this state of affairs.

Keating said big states were "rude and nasty," and referenced instances of American behaviour. "But that does not mean we can afford not to deal with them – whether it be the United States or China".

"It is the national interest and its long run trajectory which should guide our hand and not the nominally pious belchings of 'do-gooder' journalists who themselves live on leaks of agencies unfit to divine a national pathway.

"Organisations which lack comprehension as to magnitude or moment or the subtleties and

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demands of a dynamic international landscape.”

Keating said it was in Asia’s interests, including Australia’s interests, that the US remain engaged in the region.

“Closer US political and commercial links with the countries of the region should help establish a web of self-reinforcing, cooperative ties which over time, should assuage Chinese concerns that a structure is being built with the express purpose of Chinese strategic containment.

"Indeed, such a cooperative structure should encourage China to participate in the region rather than seek to dominate it.

"We want a region which gives China the space to participate but not dominate.

"Australia, for its part, should be actively involved in the development of such structures, while being wary of being caught up in a policy by the United States, should the United States come to the conclusion, that the rise of China is broadly incompatible with its strategic interests.”

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Keating said President Trump had no instinct for a military skirmish with China – which was good news – but he would not be setting a new international model.

“At the moment the current model is in serious decline. Global institutions are crumbling. Look at the WTO. The global system is under stress.

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"And regional institutions are being marginalised into the bargain. For instance, the President did not attend the recent East Asia Summit. He did not even direct his Secretary of State to attend," he said.

"On the broader point, whether the United States can assume it retains strategic guarantor status in East Asia is open to debate.

"What is not debatable is that we need the US as the balancing and conciliating power in the region."

Keating said after this presidency the US would not return to being the state it was, regardless of whether the next president was Republican or a Democrat.

Not only was the US withdrawing from Asian arrangements – it was doing the same in Europe.

Australia would be left in the "deep blue sea" dealing with the great powers of the US and China over the next 30 years.

Unfortunately debate in Australia about China had degenerated, with two propositions contributing to this, Keating said. One was the unstated assumption that somehow China's rise was illegitimate; the other was China was not a democracy. He dismissed the accuracy of the first and the relevance of the second.

China would be - was now - the predominant economic power in Asia.

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"That position will not be usurped by a non-Asian power, either economic or military.

"How does Australia respond to this?

"Is it to help divine and construct a set of arrangements which engages China but which also prevents China from dominating the region?

"Or do we seek to insulate or remove ourselves from this enormous shift in world economic power, by allowing our singular focus on the United States and our alliance with it to mark out our international personality?"

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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