



CLIMATE ENERGY FINANCE

## Australia's National Security – More Than Just China

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Public discourse on national security in Australia is evolving, as we are witnessing a difference of opinion from various sectors of the commentariat on defence, especially evident in the recent Red Alert series in Nine newspapers, and responses to the AUKUS submarine deal last week.

A week prior to the announcement of the AUKUS deal in San Diego, the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age published a [series of articles](#) speculating on the risks of a war between China and Taiwan and what that means for Australia, assessing the risk of imminent escalation into a wider armed conflict. For this, they assembled a panel of 5 experts who issued a “review” entitled [Red Alert](#), debating the issue of a potential military invasion as soon as 2026. The series was widely circulated across major media outlets and social media platforms. Many [uncritically reproduced its alarmist claims](#).

[Australia's former Prime Minister Paul Keating](#) described this series as “the most egregious and provocative news presentation of any newspaper I have witnessed in over 50 years of active public life.”

Many academics, political commentators, as well as other China experts started tweeting or writing about the inaccuracy of the reporting, and its unnecessary alarmism. Some, such as China Fellow Yun Jiang from AIIA, argued that “[a lot of reports are also devoid of concrete analyses on China's intention and capability](#)”, and noting this will certainly impact Chinese communities in Australia.

Last week, the \$386 billion, 30 year nuclear powered submarine deal with the US and the UK was signed, marking a milestone for record high Australian government defence expenditure and effectively appearing to lock Australia into a coalition with its AUKUS partners. Eighteen months since the prospective deal was [first announced](#) by the Morrison government in 2021, the agreement and its national security and geostrategic implications have brought a significant amount of controversy and criticism, including Keating's comment that the deal is the “[worst international decision by Labor government since conscription in World War I](#)”.

Nonetheless, the conversation on the AUKUS deal ranged beyond China-centric topics to the impacts on Australia domestically. For example, SBS raised concerns about the [waste](#) that the nuclear-powered submarines will bring, and criticised the uncertainty on the location of the nuclear waste dump.

Aside from the environmental worries, [The Guardian](#) focused on the controversial scale of the expenditure on the submarine program, arguing that this amount of public money could be spent on permanently alleviating energy poverty, building clean tech industries of the future, or improving community services and so on.

On the trade and energy side, the Australia Finance Review [argued](#) that the recent 'drums of war' rhetoric has ignored 'China's scarcity of resources and its inability to replace Australia as a supplier of iron ore'. And lithium, copper, nickel and rare earths.

Indeed, the AUKUS deal – which has reportedly put [China offside](#) – as well as the Red Alert reports came as a shock amid the drastic [improvement](#) in Australia-China relations since the Australian Labour Party stepped into power in 2022. Conversations had finally been transformed from the '[war of words](#)' that characterised relations under the previous government to the [restoration of trade and diplomatic relations between the two countries](#) in the first 10 months of the Albanese government. As Foreign Minister Penny Wong [argued](#), "Fifteen years ago we could separate the economic aspect and the strategic aspect of our relationship, that is no longer the case." The positive reception to her approach to foreign affairs, which has until now seen a stabilisation of relations with China, suggest her words resonate with much of the Australian public.

As significant as military defence is, Australia's framing of the recent deal is interesting. It has focused less on China and related security concerns and more on Australia's own national interests.

A case in point is that unlike US President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Albanese did not choose to deliver a China-focused [speech](#) in San Diego. Instead, he talked about 'strengthening Australia's national security and stability in our region', as well as 'building a future made in Australia' that could diversify Australia's economy and national security strategies, along with the opportunities for a better Australia-US-UK alliance.

The AUKUS deal is finalised, but it doesn't mean that the Australian government is destined to go down the narrow path of the world's obsession with the threat from China. Albanese's statement in San Diego was strategic and open-ended, which arguably signals that Australia is leaving itself room to nuance the purpose of its AUKUS alignment to be more than just countering China, for example, as a 'made in Australia' initiative to encourage mining, refining and value-added manufacturing here, creating jobs for Australians, while learning from US and UK experience and new technologies, as opposed to blindly following the US and the UK.

Further, the extent to which the current controversy on China and AUKUS is engaging the electorate is moot. Recent political history suggests cost of living, rising interest rates, and disasters caused by climate change are [major topics](#) that the public wishes to be addressed by the

government now in Australia. A good example may be the significant [Green and Teal swing](#) we witnessed in the last federal election in 2022 – a reflection of the public wanting the government to place its focus on better climate and energy policy, restoration of social and economic equality, and [‘strategic equilibrium’](#) in international relations and diplomacy – something Minister for Foreign Affairs Senator Penny Wong brings in spades, in contrast to the bellicosity of the previous government.

Our world is changing, and so are our prominent security concerns. Geopolitics and sovereign security are inarguably important, but they are just the baseline of what we need now. Australian society cares about the economy and issues such as resilience in the face of the impacts of the climate and energy crisis as much as they care about countering China. Diversifying Australia’s security strategy to encompass these concerns is inarguably important because China is no longer the only, or major, threat to the world – or to Australia. Climate change and the energy crisis are clearly endangering Australia’s national interests now, and require more nuanced conversations to tackle.

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