

**Opinion** Aukus

# China's sound and fury over Aukus will mean little for ties with Australia

*Benjamin Herscovitch*

Beijing wants the relationship 'back on the right track' regardless of the trilateral pact

Thu 16 Mar 2023 08.34 AEDT

**L**eaving aside the former prime minister Paul Keating's anti-Aukus

spray at the National Press Club on Wednesday, perhaps the strongest criticism about this week's trilateral submarine deal between Australia, the US and the UK has come from Beijing.

Rehearsing now-familiar talking points, the Chinese government on Tuesday decried Aukus as an example of a "typical cold war mentality" and a threat to both "regional peace and stability" and the "international nuclear non-proliferation regime".

This stream of Chinese government objections is likely to grow to a flood as Aukus takes shape.

Yet this rhetorical sound and fury signifies little for Australia-China ties.

Although Beijing will continue to oppose Aukus, **China** is unlikely to reverse the bilateral relationship repair of recent months.

Canberra's decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines was priced into Australia-China ties long before the prime minister, Anthony Albanese, and his US and UK counterparts took to the podium in San Diego this week.

Beijing started courting Canberra with softer messaging as early as December 2021 – mere months after the news of Aukus broke in September that year.

China's shift to softer diplomacy towards Australia became more pronounced in the first half of 2022, culminating in a series of increasingly warm engagements between Australian and Chinese ministers and leaders from June 2022 onwards.

The Chinese government has been keen to re-engage with Canberra knowing full well that Australia had embraced Aukus on a bipartisan basis.

China is now also letting previously excluded Australian exports into its market, including what were once multibillion-dollar coal exports.

As with Aukus, Beijing has blinked on a wide range of other complaints against Canberra.

Australia continues its efforts to minimise China's security role in the Pacific, maintain **Australian military** presence in the disputed South China Sea, and incrementally restrict market access for Chinese technology companies. Neither these nor many other areas of dispute have stopped Beijing from repairing ties with Canberra.

China has decided that it wants to get the relationship with Australia "back on the right track" regardless of these and other enduring points of deep disagreement.

Joint Aukus press conferences and submarine capability details are therefore unlikely to prompt Beijing to put Canberra back in the diplomatic and trade freezer.

Notwithstanding China's harsh anti-Aukus rhetoric, Australia will probably be able to steam ahead with its nuclear-powered submarine plan without upsetting the overall positive trajectory of the bilateral relationship.

Of course, this does not mean that China will abandon its opposition to Aukus.

Since Aukus was revealed, the Chinese government has made clear its deep suspicion of Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines.

Beijing's hostility towards Aukus is unsurprising, especially given China's goals of eventually taking **Taiwan** and building a "world-class military" capable of prevailing in military contingencies in its near-region and beyond.

Unlike Australia's previously planned diesel-electric submarines, the Aukus boats will be able to project power far into north Asia for extended periods.

This does not mean that Australia would be locked into supporting US forces in the event of a military clash with China to defend Taiwan.

But Beijing understands that these new submarines will eventually give Australian governments the option of contributing significant additional forces to US-led military actions as far afield as the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea.

To be sure, China would still prefer to annex Taiwan without fighting. As Avril Haines, US director of national intelligence, told the House

Intelligence Committee last week: “It’s not our assessment that China wants to go to war.”

But Beijing aims to ensure that, if necessary, it has the capability to prevail in military contingencies in the Taiwan Strait and surrounds.

If Australia chooses to deploy its nuclear-powered submarines in support of a US-led effort to defend Taiwan, then Aukus will have made China’s military goals harder to achieve.

With Australia’s nuclear-powered submarines potentially impinging on China’s pursuit of what it considers to be its “core interests” in Taiwan, Beijing will ramp up its efforts to discredit Aukus.

The Chinese government will seek to stoke fears about nuclear proliferation and spread questionable claims that Australia and its Aukus partners have abrogated their international legal obligations.

Yet Aukus adds just one extra item to the already long list of China’s complaints against Australia. These include everything from Australia’s cautious approach to approving Chinese investments to Canberra’s forceful and public criticisms of the Chinese government’s systematic human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

Like these other points of bilateral tension, the latest Aukus announcements are unlikely to prompt Beijing to rethink its decision to re-engage with Canberra.

So, to paraphrase Keating, China’s criticisms of Aukus are likely to be all tip and no iceberg when it comes to the broader Australia-China relationship.

**Dr Benjamin Herscovitch is a research fellow at Australian National University and author of *Beijing to Canberra and Back*, a newsletter chronicling Australia-China relations.**