

Australian Labor PM has “reset” meeting with Xi

Mike Head**15 November 2022**

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met Chinese President Xi Jinping last night, on the sidelines of the G20 summit on the Indonesian island of Bali. The brief half-hour exchange constituted the first formal talks between an Australian PM and Xi since 2016.

In his opening public remarks at the meeting, Xi said the China-Australia relationship was “worth cherishing” but had “some difficulties” in the past few years. “This is something that we would not like to see.”

In reply, Albanese said the bilateral relationship was “an important one” but indicated there would be no basic departure from his Labor government’s alignment behind the US conflict with China. He insisted that Australia would not “resile from our interests and our values.”

Albanese’s subsequent media statement said the meeting was an “important step towards the stabilisation of the Australia-China relationship.” He said the two discussed “challenges to international peace and security, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine” and “bilateral, trade, consular and human rights issues,” but gave no details.

Later, Albanese told a press conference he asked China to exercise its influence on Russia, specifically about Russia’s threats to use tactical nuclear weapons. He said he told Xi “the war in Ukraine was having an impact on the global economy and directly having an impact, which it is, on Australian energy prices and inflation.”

Business leaders and the corporate media generally welcomed the meeting, using language such as a “reset” of relations with China, which remains by far Australian capitalism’s largest single export market, particularly for iron ore.

This may indicate a tactical shift to ease the immediate tensions produced by the escalating US provocations against China, following the lead set by US President Joe Biden’s meeting with Xi in Bali on Monday.

Nevertheless, the underlying strategy has not changed.

The Labor government remains unconditionally committed to acting as a spearhead of the US confrontation with China, which Washington has designated as a threat to American global hegemony.

Just in the past few weeks, Albanese underscored that role by announcing plans to station long-range, nuclear-capable US B52 bombers in northern Australia, and pledging to spend whatever is “necessary” to acquire long-range missiles and other hi-tech weaponry—all of which would be critical for involvement in a US-led war against China.

Significantly, Albanese’s meeting with Xi was held after Albanese first had a 40-minute meeting with Biden and top US security officials at the East Asian summit in Cambodia two days earlier.

As the WSWS noted yesterday, Biden’s new emphasis on “managing” relations with China may point to temporary de-escalation of sharp tensions with Beijing, in order to stabilise surging prices and head off rising workers’ struggles and an economic collapse.

At the same time, there is no pulling back from Washington’s economic war against Beijing, including its ban on trade in advanced microchips with China, and its preparation for military conflict, possibly over Taiwan. In recent months, Biden has declared that the US would commit troops to defend Taiwan if China “invaded” the offshore island.

Briefing reporters after his discussion with Biden, Albanese noticeably emphasised his closeness to the US political, military and intelligence establishment. He said it was “a very constructive bilateral meeting with the president and his key national security and foreign affairs advisors, people I’ve developed quite a strong relationship with, some of them over a long period of time.”

Albanese let it be known that he and Biden discussed three central features of the plans for a potential war

against China. These were the AUKUS pact by which the US and UK will supply Australia with long-range nuclear-powered submarines, hypersonic missile technology and advanced cyber warfare capabilities; the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alliance between the US, Japan, India and Australia; and the Labor government's current Defence Strategic Review, which focusses on expanding Australia's long-range military capabilities.

Albanese said he and Biden discussed the next Quad leaders' summit, to be held in Australia next year, and he invited Biden to address a special joint sitting of the Australian parliament at that time.

In the Australian media, Albanese's meeting with Xi was depicted as a possible breakthrough against Chinese measures to freeze certain imports from Australia, such as barley, seafood and wine. But these steps followed aggressive economic and political measures taken by Australian governments against China, in line with similar moves by the US.

Those measures included banning Huawei Technologies from Australia's proposed 5G broadband network in 2018, imposing severe restrictions on investment by Chinese companies, adopting criminal laws against alleged Chinese-linked "foreign interference" and agitating for a supposed "independent" investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in a bid to blame China for the global disaster caused by the profit-driven policies of every capitalist government.

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott, who appeared at a joint media appearance with Albanese in Bali, declared the meeting with Xi was a "tremendous reset" with China, which "creates an opportunity for business to come in behind that reset." She added: "Well, I think we have to remember, this is our largest trading partner."

Murdoch media outlets welcomed the meeting, while warning Albanese against offering any concessions to Xi. The *Australian*'s foreign editor Greg Sheridan said the move was "constructive and long overdue," but insisted that there must be no reversal of the "non-negotiable" steps taken against China.

The newspaper's editor-at-large Paul Kelly said the meeting with Xi was "a diplomatic breakthrough for the new Labor government, ending the long freeze between the nations—but nobody should think this constitutes any strategic reset by Australia."

Kelly pointed to a speech by Defence Minister Richard Marles in Sydney, also last night, in which Marles called for a major expansion of Australian military spending to

"deploy and deliver combat power" throughout the region.

Since becoming Labor Party leader in 2019, Albanese has positioned Labor as the author, and therefore most committed partner, of the US military alliance, initiated during World War II, shifting from Australia's previous reliance on British imperialism.

Whatever the short-term manoeuvres by the US and its allies, the Labor government has placed the Australian population on the front line of a US war to reassert Washington's hegemony over the Indo-Pacific.

The latest US National Security Strategy, released by the Biden administration last month, proclaimed a "decisive decade" of "geopolitical conflict between the major powers" and specifically named China as the threat to US global dominance.

Like the Biden administration, the Albanese government confronts deepening social discontent due to a devastating cost of living crisis that has been compounded by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. The trade union apparatus is having difficulties in holding back the seething unrest of workers over real wage cuts, intolerable working conditions and the resurgence of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

The Labor government also faces concern throughout Southeast Asia, where many countries depend heavily on China economically, over the prospect of the US-China war. Indonesian president and G20 chairman Joko Widodo used his closing speech at the East Asia Summit to warn that the region "must not be a proxy to any powers," triggering a "new Cold War."

The "reset" could change at any time, however. The Biden administration has been seeking to provoke Beijing into military actions, possibly over Taiwan, just as the US goaded the Russian regime into a disastrous invasion of Ukraine by installing a pro-US government via a coup in 2014 and arming it to the teeth against Russia.

Even as it talks of "stabilising" relations with China, Albanese's government is taking to a new level the moves undertaken by the previous Gillard Labor government in 2011 when it signed up to the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a vast military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific, directed against China.



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