

Australian PM's visit to China part of pre-war manoeuvring

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Throughout the corporate and government media in Australia, and mostly elsewhere, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's three-day visit to China, which concluded yesterday, is being reported as a step toward "stabilising" diplomatic relations after years of mounting tensions.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The official visit to China, following a state visit to Washington to consult with the Biden administration, is bound up with the intensifying US economic and military pressure on China, accompanied by escalating preparations for war.

It is no accident that Albanese first went to the US, where he aligned himself unconditionally with American militarism, including its backing for the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. His talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders were regarded in US ruling circles as something of a dummy run for President Joe Biden's planned meeting with Xi in San Francisco next week.

At the White House, Biden publicly warned Albanese to "trust—but verify" the Chinese president's words, parroting a phrase once used by President Ronald Reagan to describe his aggressive attitude toward Soviet leaders. No doubt, Biden's private instructions would have been more blunt.

Albanese, whose government is facing growing unpopularity in the working class at home because of its massive military spending, support for Israel's crimes and the cost-of-living crisis, nervously claimed his meeting with Xi was "positive" and "constructive."

Yet he stuck firmly to the Biden administration's refusal to accede to China's requested admission to the US-dominated 11-nation Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a so-called regional free trade pact.

Albanese adhered to Washington's claim that membership of the CPTPP required "high standards" of removing trade barriers. In reality, the US insistence on freezing China out of the pact is part of the Biden administration's continuation of protectionist sanctions against Chinese exports and investment.

Albanese also brushed aside a call by Xi to "keep moving forward the comprehensive strategic partnership between our two countries," an unclear relationship that was proclaimed by Xi and then Prime Minister Tony Abbott in 2014, but soon dropped.

At his media conferences, Albanese pointedly reiterated his government's commitment to the \$368 billion AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine partnership with the US and UK, which is

aimed squarely at China, declaring "we're busy implementing it."

Albanese is expected to report back to the White House on his discussions with Xi. James Curran, the *Australian Financial Review's* international editor, observed: "[Y]ou can be sure that the timing of Albanese's telephone conversation with Biden before the US president's own meeting with Xi in San Francisco next week is already being locked in."

The truth is that there is no letup in the US drive for war against China, which Washington has designated as an existential threat to American global hegemony. The Albanese-Xi and Biden-Xi talks are part of pre-war manoeuvring.

As all the parties know, including Albanese, US industrial and military capacity is being ramped up, particularly to develop the huge military production needed to win what would be a catastrophic war, almost certainly involving nuclear weapons.

There is a mounting US drive to cut off Chinese access to hi-tech industrial development, strangle its economy and, as soon as possible, end its near-global monopoly over the processing of many critical minerals that are essential for war production.

Because of its large deposits of critical minerals, as well as its geographic location and bullying pro-US role in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia is pivotal to US war plans. These crucial issues have been buried by the compliant media during Albanese's trips to the US and China.

Albanese's talks in Shanghai and Beijing were presented by the media and political establishment as a breakthrough, on the basis that he became the first Australian prime minister in seven years to be invited to China, which remains by far Australian capitalism's largest export market.

A diplomatic freeze began in 2016 as a result of US-aligned provocations by Canberra. The then Turnbull Liberal-National Coalition government blocked Chinese telco giants Huawei and ZTE from Australia's 5G network and imposed other investment and trade bans, matching the Obama administration in accusing China of "foreign interference."

Relations worsened in 2020 under the Morrison Coalition government, which lined up with the Trump administration in essentially accusing China of deliberately setting loose the COVID-19 virus on the world. Morrison demanded an international investigation into the origin of COVID-19, complete with the deployment of "inspectors" like those sent into Iraq to concoct the "weapons of mass destruction" lie that provided the pretext for the US-led invasion and pulverisation of Iraq in 2003.

In the short-term, Albanese's Labor government is seeking to enable Australian-based businesses, especially the mining giants, agricultural companies, tourism operators and universities, to make as much money as possible before armed hostilities erupt.

After his meeting with Xi, Albanese was at pains to declare that the easing of Chinese "impediments" to certain Australian exports had led to these exports rising to \$6 billion between January and August, compared to \$85 million last year. Albanese claimed that this was good for "Australian jobs," when in fact the benefits flow overwhelmingly to big business.

A bevy of corporate chiefs joined Albanese in China, hailing the profit prospects. On the first day of his trip, Albanese made a point of visiting a trade expo in Shanghai and boasting that more than 250 "Australian businesses" had stalls there.

Business leaders are acutely aware of the rising military tensions, however, and are making their plans accordingly. Australia-China Business Council president David Olsson warned: "All Australian businesses are very conscious of the fact the operating environment is changing," adding, "They have to do their due diligence."

In the leadup to his US and China trips, Albanese reinforced his government's commitment to American imperialism's offensive to economically and militarily encircle China. In September, he underscored Australian imperialism's pro-US role in the region by visiting the Philippines for a meeting with President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos to declare a strategic partnership.

Under that agreement, the two governments will start joint naval patrols in the South China Sea, one of the flashpoints that Washington has inflamed, accusing China of military aggression.

While in the US, Albanese gave total support to US militarism, including the US-backed Israeli onslaught on Gaza and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. He lobbied for the US Congress to pass Biden's massive \$105 billion military spending package for the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, especially that part that will help fund AUKUS.

Despite all this, Xi had reasons to publicly welcome Albanese. Increasingly beleaguered by punitive US measures, the Chinese economy, and therefore its military capacity, depends substantially on raw material imports from Australia, especially for iron ore, liquefied natural gas and critical minerals.

China's economy is being pounded by a property crisis, falling exports, high unemployment, and a US-led Western investment pull-out. Data on Saturday showed China recorded negative foreign direct investment for the first time since 1998. That was minus \$US11.8 billion in the July-September quarter. Companies pulled more money out of China than they put in.

With the Albanese government's assistance, Washington is attempting to further tighten a noose around the Chinese economy and, at the same time, accelerate US war preparations. It is seeking to divert supplies of critical minerals—those essential for modern weaponry as well as industrial electrification and other hi-tech development—from Australia to be processed in the US, rather than China.

Currently, mines in Australia produce a significant proportion of the world's critical minerals, but nearly all are shipped to China for processing. For example, Australia supplies more than half of

the world's lithium, which is essential for armour, airframes, jet engines and nuclear reactors, as well as batteries and electric vehicles, but 96 percent of it goes to China.

This was high on the agenda during Albanese's US visit. Among the measures announced by Biden and Albanese was an expanded partnership on critical minerals. Their joint statement emphasised the need to protect "supply chains"—essential for war. It also hailed the greater integration of the Australian and US armed forces, including expanded US basing access in Australia.

The critical minerals thrust was underlined by an article in the *Washington Post* previewing Albanese's Beijing visit. It carried a link to a report issued in June by the government-sponsored Australian Strategic Institute (ASPI), co-authored by former Australian Labor Party leader and defence minister Kim Beazley, a life-long participant in collaboration with the US political and military-intelligence apparatus.

The ASPI report set out in chilling terms the necessity to grab control over critical minerals and their processing. "Mass military production wins wars," it declared, adding: "This is where Australia comes in. Australia has the essential minerals, which are more readily exploitable because they're located in less densely populated or ecologically sensitive areas."

The report emphasised: "Australia is ground zero for AUKUS because the alliance is based on supply-chain security that enables war-winning capabilities." It urged a much faster pace of industrial war preparation, because "establishing a viable non-Chinese supply chain will take years."

These are some of the real calculations behind Albanese's US and China trips. Whatever the immediate manoeuvres to better prepare for war, these preparations are being accelerated. This is happening behind rosy media coverage designed to keep the populations of all the countries involved in the dark because of the widespread opposition to such a disastrous war.

To underscore Australian imperialism's key role in enforcing the US offensive throughout the region, Albanese flew direct from Beijing to the Cook Islands for this year's Pacific Island Forum, where he will ratchet up the pressure on the small island states to line up with the US against China.



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