

Deep rifts remain after Chinese foreign minister visits Australia

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Despite attempts by both sides to downplay tensions, the visit to Australia this week by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi only underscored the deep divide between the two countries as Canberra lines up with Washington in its accelerating war preparations throughout the Indo-Pacific against Beijing.

Wang is the highest-ranking Chinese official to visit Australia in years. There has been a souring of relations over trade and investment but, above all, Australia's direct involvement in the US-led military build-up in the region. Wang visited the country in 2017 and Chinese President Xi Jinping last made the trip in 2014, a decade ago.

Nominally, Wang was in Australia to meet with Foreign Minister Penny Wong on Wednesday for the seventh Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue, following on from the sixth dialogue in Beijing in December 2022. Both sides, for their own reasons, have sought to improve fractured relations.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is seeking the reopening of markets in China, the world's second largest economy and Australia's largest trading partner. While Canberra, backed by Washington, has condemned Beijing for imposing trade restrictions on several Australian exports, China's actions have been in response to Australia's blocking of Chinese investment on spurious "security" grounds.

For its part, China, confronted with US efforts to tighten the strategic noose around China through its alliances in both Asia and Europe, is trying to loosen those ties, by arguing for a multipolar world—that is, one not dominated by the US. The strategic interests of Australian imperialism and the European imperialist powers have, however, been closely bound up with the post-World War II order controlled by Washington.

The lack of any fundamental agreement was on open

display during Wang's visit. Whatever was discussed behind closed doors by the two foreign ministers and their advisers, it was only reported, separately, to the Australian and Chinese media in the most general terms. Despite the meeting being billed as a foreign policy and strategic dialogue, no joint statement was released and no press conference was held.

That, in itself, demonstrated the lack of agreement—the inability to cobble together, even in the anodyne language typical of bourgeois diplomacy, a few points on views held in common. A press conference, in particular, would have rapidly exposed the antagonistic interests. Any question on the anti-China AUKUS military pact announced in 2021 between the US, UK and Australia, or the nuclear-powered attack submarines to be provided to the Australian navy under the agreement, would have provoked sharply divergent responses.

In her comments to the media before and after the talks, Wong said she had confronted Wang on China's failure to condemn Russia over the Ukraine war as well as on "maritime security"—a veiled reference to US-stoked tensions in the South China Sea—and on the utterly hypocritical issue of human rights, including the suspended death sentence on the dubious figure Yang Hengjun, a former Chinese intelligence agent turned Australian citizen and democracy advocate.

This is from an Australian government and foreign minister that have followed the US in backing to the hilt Israel's genocidal war in Gaza.

As reported in the Chinese media, Wang suggested that Australia should provide a non-discriminatory business environment—a reference to various Australian bans on Chinese investment. He said the most valuable thing for the relationship was "independence and autonomy"—an obvious reference to Australian strategic

dependence on the US.

Wang, who visited New Zealand (NZ) earlier in the week, reportedly voiced Chinese objections to AUKUS and to New Zealand's push to join the military pact in discussions with NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters. In comments to the media, Peters declared that New Zealand stood on "the right of countries to organise their defence arrangements" and suggested that China was a threat to NZ's long-term security.

As in New Zealand, the talks in Australia yielded nothing of substance—further dialogue, vague cooperation on climate and energy, a potential visit by Chinese Premier Li Qiang, not President Xi as earlier mooted, a possible reduction of Chinese tariffs on Australian wine exports and a longer stay by two Chinese pandas at the Adelaide Zoo.

As well as meeting with Prime Minister Albanese, Opposition leader Peter Dutton and Australian business leaders, Wang pointedly organised a meeting on Thursday with former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating, one of the very few vocal ruling class critics of AUKUS and Australia's line-up with the US war drive against China.

Keating, who represents corporate layers reliant on trade with China and anxious about the prospect of war, was remarkably reserved, according to the Chinese account of the meeting. Reportedly he referred only to Labor's role in developing ties with Beijing and to Chinese economic growth as "conducive to regional peace and stability."

That did not stop the political attacks, particularly in Murdoch's *Australian*, denouncing the meeting as illegitimate, Wang for holding it and Keating for taking part. While the opposition Coalition welcomed Wang's visit, its foreign affairs spokesman Simon Birmingham condemned Keating's decision as "reckless" and "irresponsible."

Malcolm Davis of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which is closely aligned with the pro-US military and intelligence establishment, denounced Wang for proposing the meeting and Keating for being a fool, or, by implication, a traitor. Davis said the meeting showed China's hostile intentions and represented a "huge propaganda victory" for Beijing.

Wang's aim, he said, was "to undermine Australia-US relations," "destroy AUKUS" and "ensure that ultimately where that leads is for Australia to

effectively bend the knee to Beijing and align with China."

Actually, the Australian government organised a thinly-disguised provocation to coincide with Wang's visit to Australia. Having barely concluded her meeting with Wang, Foreign Minister Wong walked into a meeting on Friday of the Australia-UK Ministerial Consultations (AUKMIN) with Defence Minister Richard Marles and their British counterparts.

The AUKMIN meeting did conclude with a joint statement and media conference. It made absolutely clear the unqualified British and Australian support for US-backed wars against Russia in Ukraine, Israel in Gaza and the intensifying US-led confrontation with China. These are the first shots of a far broader global conflict involving nuclear-armed powers. The statement specifically linked Europe and Asia, declaring that "the security and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are inseparable."

Already part of AUKUS with the US, Britain is ratchetting up its military and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific with the assistance of Australia. Among other measures, the statement, as well as parroting key aspects of Washington's anti-China propaganda, highlighted the establishment of a "status of forces" agreement allowing greater mutual military access, joint action in response to alleged military threats and the expanded involvement of British military forces in Australian war games and military intelligence.

Wang's meeting with Keating hardly foreshadowed the transformation of Australian imperialism into a Chinese vassal. The AUKMIN talks, by contrast, laid out concrete steps for greater British and Australian participation in Washington's advanced plans for war with China in a reckless bid to ensure US global dominance.



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