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Australia Balances Diplomacy and Defense as PM Engages China

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As Prime Minister Anthony Albanese embarks on a diplomatic mission to China, Australia is hosting the Talisman Sabre 2025 military exercises, involving approximately 35,000 personnel from 19 nations, with a clear focus on countering Beijing's regional ambitions. This juxtaposition highlights Australia's delicate balancing act: pursuing economic ties with

its largest trading partner while strengthening defence alliances in response to China's growing military assertiveness.

Albanese's six-day visit to Shanghai, Beijing and Chengdu aims to strengthen trade relations, a priority given China accounts for nearly a third of Australia's exports. In meetings with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, the Prime Minister is seeking to build on improving bilateral ties, evidenced by China's recent lifting of trade restrictions, including a ban on Australian rock lobster. However, critics argue that this charm offensive risks downplaying serious security concerns. Shadow Foreign Minister Michaelia Cash emphasised the need to confront China's provocative actions, such as its live-fire drills in the Tasman Sea earlier this year. "The Prime Minister must address Beijing's disrespectful naval manoeuvres," she said.

At the same time, the Talisman Sabre exercises, conducted across Queensland, the Northern Territory and, for the first time, Papua New Guinea, underscore Australia's commitment to regional security. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) anticipates that Chinese surveillance vessels will monitor the drills, as they have in previous years. Defence Minister Richard Marles stated that if Chinese ships appear, "it is very much business as usual." The exercises, which include allies such as the United States, Japan and several European and Indo-Pacific partners, signal a coordinated response to China's military expansion. Marles has described this buildup as the most significant since the Second World War. The exercises also align with Australia's AUKUS partnership with the United Kingdom and the United States, which aims to enhance deterrence capabilities amid ongoing tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea.

The Albanese government's approach has drawn scrutiny for appearing to prioritise trade over national security. Critics warn that a failure to confront Beijing's actions – including the continued detention of Australian writer Yang Hengjun – risks projecting weakness. As China expands its influence across the Pacific, Australia must navigate this complex relationship with vigilance, ensuring that economic interests do not come at the cost of sovereignty or regional stability. The Talisman Sabre exercises serve as a reminder that diplomacy with China must be backed by credible and consistent defence preparedness.