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Albanese's China Visit Aims to Reset Trade Ties, But Risks Remain

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's latest trip to China signals a calculated push to stabilize frayed economic ties. Yet, skepticism lingers over the long-term cost of rekindling relations with an increasingly assertive Beijing. The weeklong diplomatic and commercial tour includes high-level meetings with Chinese leaders and business engagement, raising concerns about Australia's economic overreliance on a country known for its political coercion.

Albanese arrived in Shanghai over the weekend and met with Shanghai Communist Party Secretary Chen Jining on Sunday. This marks the beginning of a tightly choreographed visit that will also include talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Zhao Leji, Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC).

According to Chinese state broadcaster *China Global Television Network* (CGTN), Albanese is leading what he described as “a huge business delegation,” signaling how central trade is to this visit. The Australian delegation is set to meet with industry, tourism, and sports representatives in Shanghai and Chengdu. A key event of the trip is a CEO roundtable scheduled for Tuesday in Beijing, according to the Prime Minister's office.

Albanese also presided over the signing of a new tourism agreement between Chinese travel conglomerate *Trip.com* and *Tourism Australia*, aimed at attracting more Chinese tourists to Australia, a sector still recovering from pandemic-era disruptions. While the partnership may offer short-term economic boosts, it raises valid questions about whether Australia is again walking into a dependency trap, especially with a partner whose track record shows a willingness to weaponize trade when politically expedient.

The prime minister, who leads the center-left Labor Party, has now visited China twice since assuming office in 2022. While he emphasizes the importance of economic engagement with China, his government claims it is also committed to “diversifying” Australia's trade relationships. That message, however, seems undermined by the size and scope of the business contingent accompanying him.

It's worth noting that many of the trade barriers imposed by China were retaliatory, following Australia's previous calls under a conservative administration for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19. Those unofficial sanctions impacted more than AUD 13 billion (Australian Dollars) in exports annually. Albanese's government has since managed to ease some of those restrictions, but at the price of downplaying criticism of China's internal policies and international behavior.

In a carefully worded statement during his meeting with Chen, Albanese said, “My government very much values our relationship with China. We deal with each other calmly and consistently, and we want to continue to pursue our national interests.” However, critics argue that such diplomatic phrasing masks a troubling willingness to sideline national security and ethical concerns in favor of trade access.

Chinese state media, including *Xinhua News Agency*, framed the visit as evidence of “steadily improving” ties and dismissed any significant conflict between the two nations. “By managing differences through mutual respect and focusing on shared interests,” an editorial claimed, “the two sides can achieve common prosperity.” Yet history suggests Beijing’s definition of “mutual respect” often requires silence on issues like human rights, military aggression, and disinformation.

Albanese’s visit may offer some temporary economic relief, but the broader implications of deepening ties with a regime known for economic coercion and political interference should not be underestimated. As Australia attempts to walk the line between diplomacy and dependence, many are asking: At what point does engagement begin to look more like appeasement?