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Albanese Pressed to Take Firm Stance on China for Detained Australian's Release

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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has committed to reviewing the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) during his Beijing visit, aiming to strengthen economic ties with Australia's largest trading partner while facing criticism that the approach may compromise national interests. The move raises concerns about balancing trade gains with security and human rights priorities.

During his six-day trip beginning 12 July 2025, Albanese met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang to discuss expanding ChAFTA, signed in 2015, to include sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI), green energy, and digital trade. Chinese Ambassador Xiao Qian, writing in *The Australian Financial Review*, called for a review with “a more open attitude and higher standard”, signalling Beijing’s push for deeper economic integration. Albanese, speaking to reporters in Shanghai, remained non-committal on specifics, stating, “We will determine our policy.”

ChAFTA facilitated \$312 billion in two-way trade in 2024, with China removing \$20 billion in trade barriers since Albanese’s 2023 visit, boosting exports like rock lobster and barley.

Critics argue the Labor government’s eagerness to expand trade risks overlooking China’s military assertiveness and human rights abuses. Shadow Foreign Minister Michaelia Cash told Sky News, “Albanese must prioritise national security and the release of detained Australians like Yang Hengjun, not just trade deals.” Yang, a writer detained since 2019 and sentenced in 2024 to a suspended death sentence on espionage charges he denies, remains a key concern. Advocates continue to urge stronger government action. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s (ASPI) Justin Bassi warned against prioritising short-term economic gains, stating, “Australia must stand firm on core interests like security and human rights.” Beijing’s interest in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) adds complexity, with Australia, as chair, under pressure to manage China’s bid amid tensions over Taiwan’s CPTPP application.

Albanese's business delegation, including executives from Rio Tinto and Macquarie Bank, underscores the economic stakes, with a CEO roundtable in Beijing focusing on green metals and clean energy. However, the Labor government's approach risks appearing soft on China's provocations, such as recent naval exercises in the Tasman Sea. As trade talks progress, Australia must ensure economic benefits do not come at the cost of sovereignty or ethical principles.