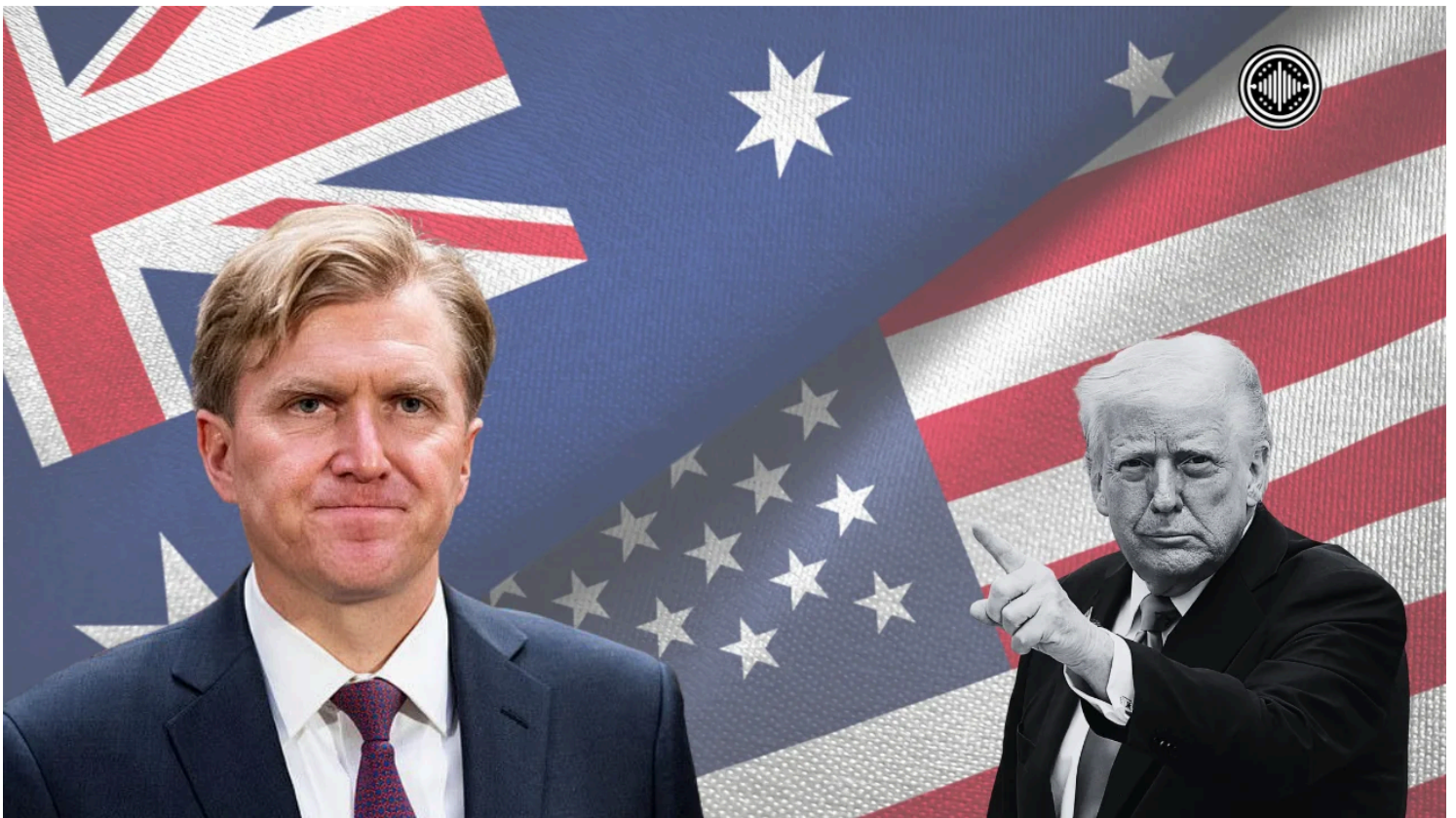


Australia's China Strategy Under Scrutiny as Trump Demands Clarity on Taiwan

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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit to China—beginning with his arrival in Shanghai on Saturday with fiancée Jodie Haydon has come under scrutiny after pointed questions from the Trump administration regarding Australia's role in a potential Taiwan conflict. As Albanese prepared to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping, the United States pressed Australia to clarify its position on a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as part of its territory.

Albanese's visit focused on promoting trade and tourism, aiming to reinforce Australia's economic ties with China. However, the Trump administration shifted the narrative, with U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Elbridge Colby reportedly pressing both Australia and Japan to clarify their roles in a potential Indo-Pacific conflict. According to a Financial Times report citing five sources, these discussions took place during recent high-level meetings. Colby defended the U.S. approach on X, stating, "We at the Department of Defense are focused on implementing the President's 'America First' agenda of restoring deterrence and achieving peace through strength." He claimed this strategy was already yielding results, noting that several allies were recognising the "urgent need to step up" and were acting accordingly.

When asked about Australia's response to a potential conflict, Albanese cited the AUKUS security pact, stating, "We have our AUKUS arrangements in place. Our alliance with the United States is very important to Australia, and we'll continue to engage constructively." He reiterated Australia's position on Taiwan: "We support the status quo. We do not support any unilateral changes." This measured response aligns with decades of Australian policy but sidesteps the more direct commitment the US appears to seek.

The Trump administration's pressure comes amid reports that the U.S. expects Australia to publicly affirm its willingness to operate nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS in a potential conflict with China, though no formal commitment has been made. Yet, Elbridge Colby himself has previously cast doubt on the submarine deal, leading a review into the pact earlier this year. This scrutiny underscores the tension between Australia's sovereignty and its alliance obligations. Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy stated in an ABC interview, "Only the elected government of the day can decide to commit Australia to conflict or allow our territory to be used in conflict. Sovereignty will always be paramount."

Albanese's meeting with Xi was his second official encounter with the Chinese leader, following their first in November 2023. Critics noted Albanese prioritized the China trip over arranging a meeting with President Trump, who left the G7 summit in Canada early in June due to urgent Middle East developments. This echoes a precedent set by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who met Xi shortly after taking office in 2013 before meeting then-US President Barack Obama.

Tensions in the Indo-Pacific have escalated as China expands its influence, building militarized artificial islands in the South China Sea and securing diplomatic shifts in nations like Kiribati and the Solomon Islands, which switched allegiance to Beijing in 2019. The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy recently increased its regional presence, with three

warships conducting operations off Australia's east coast. Analysts warn that China could attempt to seize Taiwan within the next decade, raising the stakes for Australia's balance between economic ties with China and security commitments to the United States.

Albanese deflected calls for public statements on tactical military matters, stating on Sunday, "You don't take private comments to a media conference. We engage maturely, that's the way we handle our relationships." Yet, with the Trump administration's demands and a Labour government facing domestic criticism for its foreign policy approach, Australia's position in this geopolitical chess game remains under intense scrutiny.

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