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Anthony Albanese commits to China FTA review during Beijing visit

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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is facing renewed pressure to take a firmer stance against China over the detention of Australian writer Yang Hengjun, amid criticism that his recent diplomatic visit to Beijing placed trade ahead of human rights.

Yang, a pro-democracy blogger and former Chinese diplomat, has been detained in China since 2019 and was handed a suspended death sentence in February 2024 on espionage charges he denies. Human rights organisations, academics, and political critics have condemned the ruling, citing a lack of transparency and concerns about Yang's deteriorating health in custody.

Speaking to *SBS News*, Yang's friend and former PhD supervisor, Associate Professor Feng Chongyi, accused Albanese of delivering "only lip service" during his visit, saying: "It is too weak, too soft. It is only lip service, rather than a harsh demand that you have to release Dr Yang." Feng urged the government to use Australia's significant mineral exports—particularly iron ore, natural gas, and lithium—as leverage to pressure Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He warned that Yang's life is in danger due to a lack of adequate medical care in detention.

While in Beijing, Albanese declined to speak specifically about Yang's case, calling it "inappropriate and insensitive" to do so publicly. However, he defended his government's approach, stating that "patient, calibrated advocacy" had contributed to diplomatic wins, including the release of other detained Australians such as journalist Cheng Lei.

Australia's two-way trade with China reached \$312 billion in 2024, with China remaining the nation's largest trading partner. The Albanese government has prioritised stabilising relations with Beijing, leading to the lifting of several trade restrictions worth \$20 billion on Australian goods including barley, wine, and coal.

This focus on trade has drawn criticism from the opposition. Shadow Foreign Minister Michaelia Cash told *Sky News*: “Australians expect their leaders to stand up for our citizens, not just our exports.” She also called on the Prime Minister to publicly condemn China’s broader human rights record, including its actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

There are also ongoing concerns about China’s military activities in the region. Earlier in 2025, Chinese naval exercises near Australia’s coast disrupted several civilian flights, prompting security warnings and calls for greater transparency.

Albanese’s supporters point to restored diplomatic channels and the easing of economic tensions as key achievements. Yet critics argue that these gains must not come at the cost of ignoring individual human rights cases such as Yang’s.