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Albanese Receives Warm Beijing Reception, Signaling Temporary Thaw in Tensions

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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's six-day visit to China, covering Shanghai, Beijing and Chengdu, marked a significant improvement in Australia–China relations after several years of tension. While the visit delivered strong economic outcomes, critics argue the Labor government's trade-first focus risks overlooking important strategic and security concerns.

On 15 July 2025, Albanese met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang in Beijing. Xi described the relationship as having “emerged from a low point” and highlighted its “steady development,” according to China’s state-run Xinhua News Agency. Albanese said the relationship had entered a new phase focused on dialogue and cooperation.

The visit centred on trade and economic recovery. Albanese took part in a CEO roundtable in Shanghai with major firms such as BYD and Baowu Steel. His visit also coincided with the removal of over A\$20 billion in trade restrictions, including tariffs and import bans on Australian products like wine, barley, lobster and beef. These trade barriers were introduced during the diplomatic standoff under the Morrison government.

Despite the economic progress, Albanese raised several sensitive topics in private meetings. These included the detention of Australian writer Yang Hengjun, concerns about recent Chinese military activity near Australian waters, and the federal government’s plan to reclaim the Port of Darwin lease from Chinese company Landbridge. Premier Li Qiang reportedly pushed back on this plan and expressed concern over how Chinese investment is treated in Australia.

Symbolically, the visit projected a renewed warmth between the two countries. Albanese was welcomed with a formal lunch at the Great Hall of the People, and Australian rock songs were reportedly played during events. However, analysts caution that the friendly optics masked ongoing disagreements on security and regional influence.

Albanese declined to expand the existing China–Australia Free Trade Agreement to include artificial intelligence and green energy

technologies. This cautious approach signalled that while economic cooperation would continue, Australia would avoid deeper strategic integration in sensitive sectors.

The visit came amid heightened geopolitical tensions. The United States continues to press allies for clarity on Taiwan, while Australia has maintained its long-standing policy of not speculating on hypothetical military scenarios. Acting Defence Minister Pat Conroy reaffirmed this position, which some opposition members have criticised as ambiguous.

James Laurenceson, Director of the Australia–China Relations Institute, noted that “Albanese is not running away from the relationship” but is seeking to strike a careful balance between economic engagement and national security.

Although the visit has helped stabilise relations and unlock trade opportunities, questions remain about how the Albanese government will protect Australia’s sovereignty and uphold its security alliances. Managing the Australia–China relationship will require a firm, principled approach that does not sacrifice long-term national interests for short-term economic gains.