

Chinese Premier Li visits Australia to counter US-led war drive but leaves with no concessions

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Chinese Premier Li Qiang concluded a four-day tour of Australia on Tuesday afternoon. It was the first trip to the country by a Chinese premier, Beijing's second most powerful position, in seven years.

The Labor government and the Australian media, along with their Chinese state counterparts, have largely presented the visit as a step towards the "normalisation" of relations between the two countries.

Beijing ended leader-to-leader exchanges under the previous Liberal-National Coalition government in response to its provocative actions, including calls for a weapons inspectors-style international investigation into the origins of COVID-19 and imposition of sweeping tariffs.

The official platitudes served to conceal the real dynamic of Li's visit. His Chinese government is facing a full-court press from the US and its partners, including Australia, involving a deepening economic war, the development of aggressive military alliances and a vast military build-up.

Li's trip had the character of a desperate rearguard attempt to counter the developing war drive and to emphasise the critical importance of Chinese trade to the Australian economy. The concessions, however, were entirely on the Chinese side, and the Labor government did not shift one iota from its alignment with the US-led anti-China push.

Li's visit was part of a three-country regional tour, which began in New Zealand and is in its last leg with meetings in Malaysia. In New Zealand, Li signed trade and business deals, but the country's right-wing Prime Minister Christopher Luxon told the media that at least half of the closed-door discussions centred on areas of "disagreement."

Li reportedly warned New Zealand against joining AUKUS, the pact between the US, Britain and Australia that is militarising the Indo-Pacific as the spearhead of US war preparations targeting China.

Under AUKUS, Australia is acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, whose purpose would be to conduct offensive operations throughout the Indo-Pacific, up to the approaches of the Chinese mainland. That is one component of a broader build-up, including plans to acquire hypersonic missiles, the

development of offensive strike capabilities and the ever greater basing of US military assets.

AUKUS has repeatedly been denounced by Chinese officials and state media as a threat to peace in the Indo-Pacific.

Li did not raise AUKUS publicly while he was in Australia and there are no reports of him having done so behind closed doors. The implication is that China does not see any means of reversing Australia's participation in the militarist pact, itself an indication of the extent of the breach between the countries.

Li's statements struck a conciliatory note. After landing in Adelaide on Saturday, the Chinese premier declared that relations were "back on track after a series of twists and turns." He called for an approach based on "seeking common ground while shelving differences."

Even those mild-mannered remarks received an implicit rebuke from Australia's Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. He repeatedly stated that Australia's approach was to "cooperate where we can, disagree where we must and engage in the national interest."

In their Monday discussions, Albanese reportedly raised with Li the full gamut of US talking points directed against China, something that was foreshadowed in the press prior.

That included claims that China is engaged in aggressive and dangerous actions in the South China Sea and more broadly in the Indo-Pacific. In reality, it is the US and its allies that are engaged in a sweeping military build-up throughout the region. Washington has inflamed longstanding territorial disputes between China and regional states such as the Philippines over the South China Sea, transforming them into a flashpoint for potential war.

Albanese also reportedly raised several "near-miss" incidents between Australian and Chinese military forces. These murky encounters have had the character of US-inspired provocations. Occurring thousands of kilometres from Australian shores, in some cases close to Chinese waters, they have been used as the pretext for frothing denunciations of China's "dangerous" behavior. Beijing has consistently accused Australia of instigating the encounters.

Albanese flew the tattered flag of "human rights." That has

always been hypocritical, but all the more so now that the US and Australia are supporting the worst war crimes of the past eighty years in the Israeli genocide of Palestinians.

Very little came out of the meeting between Albanese and Li. Five memoranda of understanding were signed, committing in general to the maintenance of economic relations and further discussions, as well as referencing secondary matters like “cultural exchanges.”

Sections of the media trumpeted concessions, but they are on the Chinese side. China has shelved tariffs on Australian wine exports and other luxury goods. Li outlined a new travel program, allowing Australians to visit China without a visa.

The Chinese tariffs, presented as aggressive, were retaliatory measures. Australia had imposed vast imposts on Chinese imports including tariffs on some Chinese steel products of more than sixty percent.

The World Trade Organization ruled against those measures last March, in a decision that was buried in the press. While Australia has not renewed tariffs on Chinese wind turbines, which expired in April, future imposts on Chinese steel imports have yet to be decided. Meanwhile, the US and the European powers are implementing sweeping trade war measures, including the announcement by the Biden administration last month of a massive 100 percent tariff on Chinese electric vehicles.

Australia has not gone that far, due to its economic dependence on Chinese trade. According to media reports, however, a central aim of Li was to win support for Chinese investment in the Australian critical minerals sector and its backing for Chinese participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. He left with nothing on both fronts.

Last month, Labor Treasurer Jim Chalmers ordered five Chinese-linked entities to reduce their holdings in the Northern Minerals corporation, which mines critical minerals in Western Australia. It was the first use of “national security” economic powers, and aligned with a broader US-led push to oust China from critical mineral supply chains.

Li concluded his visit on Monday with a visit to mines in Western Australia. It had the character of a pointed reminder that China remains Australia’s largest export market, with two-way trade between the two countries having grown by 9.2 per cent in 2023 and now totalling \$326.9 billion.

Australia, however, is fully committed to the US war drive. As a minor imperialist power, it has always advanced its own predatory interests under the umbrella of the dominant power of the day, first Britain and then the US. Over the past 15 years, Australia’s alignment with the US war drive has continually deepened. Those within the political establishment who raised tactical criticisms have been sidelined and the dominant sections have signalled their full support for the anti-China offensive.

Underscoring these realities, as soon as Li left, the anti-

Chinese rhetoric from the government ratcheted up. Labor joined with the US in denouncing Beijing over another murky clash with a Philippine vessel in the South China Sea. In fact, the incident underscored how the US is deliberately creating the conditions for a potential war (see: “Collision between Chinese and Philippine vessels in South China Sea bring war tensions in the region to a breaking point”).

Commentary has made clear that the visit does not mark any substantial shift.

In the *Australian Financial Review* this morning, Rory Medcalf, who has close connections to the national security establishment, proclaimed that the “tragic reality of the 2020s is a world of all-round struggle over power, influence, values and rules” between the US and its allies on one side and China on the other.

“It’s regional, global and full-spectrum: not just military but reaching into economics, technology, resources, energy, sovereignty, institutions, data and what people think,” he wrote, before adding, “This informs the Indo-Pacific strategic agenda of building the strongest possible web of allies and partners, commenced under previous governments and quietly adopted and refined by the current one. The Chinese regime has no illusions that we are on opposite sides.”

That is underscored by the facts on the ground, which involve an ever-expanding preparation for military conflict.

That is why the Labor government has adopted a program of “impactful projection” for the military, focussed on the development of strike capabilities across all branches of the armed forces. It is also why Labor is continuously involved in a US-led campaign throughout the region to line up Indo-Pacific states with the US war drive.

The real relations were underscored by a report in the *Saturday Paper* over the weekend, which revealed that the joint US-Australian Pine Gap spy base in the Northern Territory has undergone its largest expansion over the past four years. The aim appears to be to integrate the base, and by extension Australia as a whole, more directly into US planning for a potential nuclear war.



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