



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# The Australia-China summit - the model guiding the overall Western policy towards Beijing



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will travel to Beijing this weekend for talks with President Xi Jinping. He has a lot of confidence regarding his current policy towards China. He could be proud of the fact that he has almost normalised the previously poor relations with the largest trading partner in a year and a half of his prime ministerial mandate. At the same time, the thawing of relations with China did not harm relations with strategic partners in the West, primarily the US. On the contrary, the alliance gained a new dimension, primarily regarding security. The government in Canberra seems to have managed to strike a balance between its strategic trade interests with China and adherence to an allied policy of containing China's increasingly aggressive economic and security presence in the Pacific region.

## China has abandoned the confrontation course

The visit of PM Albanese to China from November 4 to 7 should be the pinnacle of such an approach. China will confirm that it has abandoned confrontation with Australia, primarily economic confrontation and that it has pragmatically accepted Australia as one of the most significant partners in the region, even though it has been aware of its unquestionable affiliation to a rival economic and security bloc. This will be the first interstate summit meeting since 2016. A month ago, China started to pave the way for a good summit outcome by continuing to remove barriers to Australian imports, which it introduced in 2020. The sanctions were China's response to the then Canberra government's request for an international investigation into China over the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. That response was a typical Chinese strategy of abusing economic power in the region, which Australia and its Western partners have been trying to counter. The sanctions that affected Australian exports with about \$16 billion, are now almost withdrawn after the gradual abolition of barriers. There are still a few months left to monitor the export of Australian wine, lobster

and meat from some slaughterhouses. The recent decision to release the Australian journalist Cheng Lei, sentenced to 3 years for alleged espionage, thus meeting the persistent demands of the government in Canberra, represented China's thawing gesture towards Australia.

## Change of government policy in Canberra

Beijing is using the Anthony Albanese government's approach, which differs from that of his predecessor, Scott Morrison, to adjust its policy towards Australia by significantly reducing economic constraints. While Mr Morrison's mandate was marked by confrontation with China, PM Albanese chose to fight against Chinese economic pressure with his influence in multilateral forums, primarily in the WTO, which bore fruit. Beijing has acknowledged, through the easing of economic pressure, that it did far more damage to itself than it did to its significant Pacific partner by enforcing sanctions against Australia. Therefore, for Beijing, the forthcoming summit marks the end of an episode it would like to forget as soon as possible. Beijing is turning to a pragmatic approach towards Australia as its largest trading partner, which accounts for a third of Australia's total global trade. This shift in Beijing is also a consequence of poor results from the expected strong recovery of the Chinese economy after the lifting of the three-year lockdown a year ago. It is another moment that Canberra has recognised and is using in building future relations with China.

## US support for the new Australian course

PM Albanese received significant support for his policy towards Beijing during his visit to Washington last week. He will be one of the few, if not the only, Western leader who will have talks with both the President of the US and the President of China in only 10 days. This

agenda of the Australian PM makes his government's policy a model by which the overall Western policy regarding China should be guided - maintaining trade relations at a high level, while suppressing China's policy of economic and security pressures in the region and globally. "The alliance between Australia and the United States is an anchor to peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and, quite frankly, around the world," said US President Joe Biden at a joint press conference with PM Albanese at The White House on October 25. President Biden's support for Australia's approach to China was perhaps best expressed by his answer to the question: can Canberra trust Beijing? "Trust but verify," said President Biden. Australia promised to take a "patient, calibrated, and deliberate" approach when dealing with China. "This means investing in our capabilities to prevent competition escalating into conflict, and investing in our relationships to maintain the dialogue that safeguards stability," said PM Albanese in Washington. When the US and Chinese president last met at the G20 summit in Indonesia a year ago, they decided that "stability" was the common ground on which they wanted to see their relationship develop. PM Albanese will travel to Beijing to represent the policy China could expect from the West in the coming years. This is a policy that China is forced to adapt to, as demonstrated in the case of Australia. In this respect, the first summit between Australia and China in 7 years will also serve as a preamble to a potential US-China summit that may take place in the US as early as November.