

Anthony Albanese and the People's Republic of China: an overview



Following the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) federal election defeat on May 18 2019, Bill Shorten stepped down as leader of the party. Anthony Albanese, a long-term ALP frontbencher, became the ALP's leader-elect on May 27 after an uncontested leadership ballot, and was formally endorsed as Opposition Leader on May 30. While Mr Albanese is supportive of Australian engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and of strengthening bilateral economic ties, he has also positioned himself as having due regard to the need to balance this against security considerations. All told, the new Opposition Leader seems broadly set to follow the foreign policy course charted by the ALP under Bill Shorten.

On May 30, during a press conference in Canberra, it was put to Mr Albanese that he had 'been associated with the left wing of the Labor Party for [his] whole life' and that that was 'a bastion of anti-Americanism'. The same journalist then asked Mr Albanese to 'elaborate what your views on the importance of the American alliance [sic], and how the policy under you will balance China and the US.' Mr Albanese dismissed the first observation wholesale then went on to outline an enduring

political and personal commitment to the US alliance and engagement with the US, listing, among other examples, his 'active' participation in the Australian American Leadership Dialogue.¹

Mr Albanese also characterised himself as a 'mainstream politician', including on foreign policy issues.²

He expounded on his views on Australia's management of its relationships with the US and the PRC during another press conference on June 10:³

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- 1 Anthony Albanese, press conference, Canberra, transcript, May 30 2019 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-press-conference-canberra-thursday-30-may-2019>>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Anthony Albanese, doorstep interview, Perth, transcript, June 10 2019 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-doorstop-perth-monday-10-june-2019>>.

The US is our most important ally...China is an important trading partner for Australia...We don't have to see friends as being somehow more in terms of – you can't have a relationship with China if you have a relationship with the United States.

These statements are in keeping with the ALP's foreign policy as outlined by Bill Shorten last year,⁴ and in line with the broad 'three pillar' foreign policy framework the ALP has operated within since at least 2004.⁵

Mr Albanese at the same press conference went on to say:

I believe we can have mature relationships with not just the United States but with China and other countries in our region in order to maximise the opportunities which are there...In the last century and the one before Australia was disadvantaged by the tyranny of distance. Now we're at the centre of growth and we need to take advantage of that...Not just in terms of resources, but in terms of advanced manufacturing, in terms of tourism sector, in terms of all of those opportunities that the rising middle class in average in in our region presents.

A brief overview of Mr Albanese's statements prior to assuming the position of Opposition Leader might provide some further insight into his thinking on the PRC, although with the caveat that the relationship has undergone significant changes over the last few years and that this will necessarily have some impact on current stances.

While Shadow Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Regional Development earlier this year, Mr Albanese proffered the view in an interview on May 7 that while it must be acknowledged 'that there are issues with China with the nature of the government that is not a democratically elected government', he found 'some of the commentary on China almost naïve'. In explaining the meaning behind this remark he noted that 'the suggestion that someone has had contact with people in the Chinese Communist Party

in China, who does business in China, is no more shocking than someone having contact with the Liberal Party or the Labor Party here because they don't have a separation of state and party there.'⁶ He also stated that in some instances there has been reporting that has been 'perhaps more suited to a fictional spy movie', saying:⁷

The [Chinese Communist] Party is effectively the state. And so every Australian business person, for example, who has established business in, in China...will have had contact with people by definition who are associated with the Communist Party of China. And sometimes that's reported in a way that is perhaps more suited to a fictional spy movie and I do think that it is an important relationship.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating on the sidelines of the ALP's federal election campaign launch on May 5 aired concerns about the Australian security agencies having disproportionate input into Australian foreign policy, placing at risk Australia's relationship with the PRC. On May 6, Mr Albanese, while not fully endorsing Mr Keating's comments, picked up a thread in Mr Keating's observations that he agreed with:⁸

We need to be very careful, that it is not in Australia's economic interest essentially to be xenophobic when it comes to China, and the role of China in the region. We need to examine legitimate security concerns which are there. But we also need to acknowledge that China has been a nation in which we have a friendly relationship and have had one since the Whitlam Government recognised China in 1972. That is part of Labor's legacy. We will work with the region.

This echoes, in a way, Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles' comments on the handling of the bilateral, on June 20 2018:

[W]e have always got to be making sure that bigotry has no place in the way in which we relate to China....It is really important that we engage

4 Bill Shorten, speech, 'The foreign policy of the next Labor government', transcript, October 29 2018 <https://www.billshorten.com.au/address_to_the_lowy_institute_the_foreign_policy_of_the_next_labor_government_sydney_monday_29_october_2018>.

5 See e.g., Kevin Rudd, 'The three pillars: our alliance with the US, our membership of the UN, and comprehensive engagement with Asia: a foreign policy statement by the Australian Labor Party', October 2004 <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=ld%3A%22library%2Fparty%2FZMZD6%22;src1=sm1>

6 Anthony Albanese, interview, *Sky News*, May 7 2019 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-television-interview-sky-news-tuesday-7-may-2019>>.

7 Ibid.

8 Anthony Albanese, doorstep interview, Blacktown, transcript, May 6 2019 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-doorstop-blacktown-monday-6-may-2019>>.

with China on terms which are dignified and respectful...

On Australian political rhetoric on the PRC more broadly Mr Albanese has expressed views in line with those espoused over the last two years or so by his senior leadership team,⁹ that is, that ‘some of the rhetoric around the relationship with China was overblown’ in the past. He stated:¹⁰

I think people in political leadership positions need to give appropriate statements, whether it be about China or the US or any other nation we have an important relationship with.

Mr Albanese’s publicly articulated support for Australian engagement with the PRC and for strengthening economic ties between the two countries appears to be balanced by regard for security considerations. Following Chinese company Landbridge’s successful bid to operate the Port of Darwin under a 99-year lease in October 2015, Mr Albanese in a *Sky News* interview on November 22 2015 said of the deal:¹¹

Darwin Port is an incredibly important strategic asset for our nation and because of our arrangement with the United States for joint training in northern Australia, it is important for the US as well. And it is extraordinary that there was no heads-up given to our ally in the United States...

Mr Albanese termed the deal ‘a grave error of judgement’, noting that the port ought to have been kept in Australian hands – either as a public asset or leased to ‘funds with Australian investors’:

If the port needed to be privatised, and I think there’s an argument to keep it, frankly, in public hands, such a strategic asset, but...if you look at Sydney Port and other ports around Australia, there are funds with Australian investors prepared to invest in such assets...[T]o give up a

strategic asset to a company that has links with the People’s Liberation Army in China is, I think, a grave error of judgement...

Human rights in foreign policy are an articulated priority area for the ALP. On May 1 2019 Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong said:¹²

Three areas that will be early priorities are climate change, development assistance and promotion of democracy and human rights.

Mr Albanese has nominally engaged with some of these priorities in his past portfolios. He has, for example, in the past briefly addressed the issue of human rights in the context of Australia’s relationship with the PRC. As Minister for Infrastructure and Transport on April 9 2008 at the time of Kevin Rudd’s visit to the PRC during his first stint as Prime Minister, Mr Albanese said of Mr Rudd’s comments¹³ on human rights violations in Tibet:¹⁴

Australia has a firm position of supporting one China, we support that position...but at the same time, we don’t ignore human rights issues...we also want to see human rights respected and for dialogue to occur.

Mr Albanese has also expressed support for development assistance and engagement with the Pacific in order to mitigate the possibility of militarisation by the PRC and Russia in the region. Mr Albanese told Channel Nine on July 6 2018:¹⁵

We should continue to play a leadership role in the Pacific. We don’t want to see a militarisation in the Pacific, a military presence from China or Russia. We want to be the leaders, as we have been, for many decades.

9 See e.g., Penny Wong, speech to Australia China Business Council, transcript, June 19 2018 <<https://www.pennywong.com.au/speeches/australia-china-business-council-parliament-house-canberra/>>; Jason Clare, speech to Australia China Business Council, transcript, June 19 2018 <<https://www.jasonclare.com.au/media/speeches/3990-speech-to-australia-china-business-council>>.

10 Anthony Albanese, interview, *Today Show*, Channel Nine, transcript, April 13 2018 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-television-interview-channel-nine-the-today-show-friday-13-april-2018>>.

11 Anthony Albanese, interview, *The Bolt Report*, Sky News, transcript, Nov 22 2015, <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-interview-the-bolt-report>>.

12 Penny Wong, ‘Australian values, Australia’s interests – foreign policy under a Shorten Labor government’, transcript, May 1 2019 <<https://www.pennywong.com.au/speeches/australian-values-australias-interests-foreign-policy-under-a-shorten-labor-government-the-lowy-institute-sydney/>>.

13 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘Row flares over Rudd’s Tibet comments’, April 9 2008 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-04-09/row-flares-over-rudds-tibet-comments/2397846>>.

14 Anthony Albanese, radio interview, *2UE*, transcript, April 9 2008 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/transcript-of-2ue-interview-steve-price-albanese-hockey>>.

15 Anthony Albanese, television interview, *Today Show*, Channel Nine, transcript, July 6 2018 <<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22media/pressrel/6069387%22>>.