

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Press Briefing

**“Previewing Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Official Visit to the United States”**

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FEATURING

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Paige Montfort: Thank you so much. And hello, everyone. As our operator kindly stated, my name is Paige Montfort. I'm the media relations manager here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS – in Washington, D.C.

Thank you all for joining us to preview next week's official visit to the United States of Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. I'm joined by experts who are going to weigh in on the agenda for the visit, the state of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Australia and more broadly, and the future of the alliance. And I'm going to introduce those experts in just a moment.

But first, to give you a sense of what to expect on today's call, each of these experts is going to provide some opening remarks and analysis. And then, afterwards, we'll open it up to your Q&A. And, as always, we will have a transcript out from this briefing within just a few hours today. I'll send it directly to those of you who have RSVP, and it will also be published to CSIS.org.

So now, without further ado, I'm going to introduce our experts in the order in which they will be speaking.

First is Dr. Charles Edel. He is senior advisor and our Australia Chair here at CSIS.

And next we'll hear from Kathryn Paik. She is former director for the Pacific and Southeast Asia at the National Security Council.

And finally, we have James Carouso, who is senior advisor and chairman of the Advisory Council to the Australia Chair here at CSIS.

It's a pleasure to have the three of you with us today. You're really the top experts here. So I would love to turn it over to Charlie to get us started.

Charles Edel: Great. Thanks very much, Paige. Let me just start by saying that state visits are a big deal. They're filled with plenty of pomp and circumstance, but they also serve as an opportunity to take stock of critical relationships and push them further forward. They're also relatively rare. I think this is only the fourth of the Biden administration. And I would note that even though they're rare, Australia's having its second one in four years as Trump hosted one in September of 2019.

Now, of course, both countries have had elections since then, and both countries now have very different leaders than they did four years ago. What's remained constant is how important this relationship is to both

countries. And that means that we've seen extraordinary growth in the ambitions both Washington and Canberra have for each other, an increase in what both countries now expect of each other, and both a broadening and a deepening of activities, policies, and initiatives the United States and Australia are undertaking together.

Moreover, in Australia the United States has an example of an ally pulling its weight that is increasingly willing and able to respond to shaping the region, that is more capable of doing so, that is willing to push back against attempts at coercion, and that is willing to rally others.

Now, I'll talk about Prime Minister Albanese's state visit by discussing the political and policy context of the trip, laying out what areas to expect developments in, and knowing that there's likely to be a fair amount of churn behind closed doors on a number of critical issues that are progressing, but perhaps not quite as quickly or as thoroughly as some would want.

Now, in 2021 President Biden declared that the United States has no closer or more reliable ally than Australia. Meanwhile, earlier this year, Prime Minister Albanese announced that climate and clean energy would be added as the third pillar of the alliance, alongside defense and economic cooperation, which is all to say that between AUKUS, force-posture announcements, the expansion of Quad activities, and activity on clean energy, climate change and critical minerals, the alliance has really been turbocharged over the last several years. And over the past two years we've seen the acceleration in policy cooperation and an enormous expansion in alliance activities.

Moreover, we're now seeing two center-left political administrations, which means that the political and policy alignment between Biden and Albanese is quite strong. This is reflected in polling that shows that the state and the health of the alliance is quite robust and receives broad support from all major parties in both countries, as well as the general public.

The invitation for the state visit came, of course, after Biden's canceled trip to Australia back in May. But more than just a redo or makeup, it's an opportunity to push forward a number of important policy issues. Now, the political context is also different from when Biden and Albanese last met. Over the weekend, Australia held a national referendum on whether to amend the constitution to recognize indigenous people and to create a body for them to advise government. This was a signature initiative of Anthony Albanese's, and it was resoundingly defeated. This was the Labor government's biggest

political defeat to date. And while it will not cause the immediate defeat of Labor, it is a significant political loss that will reverberate into other areas.

Now, on the American side, still the U.S. Congress is without a speaker of the House, which is, among other things, pushing back the timeline on some critical votes, such as the National Defense Authorization Act. And at the strategic level, the war in Ukraine, Israel's war against Hamas, are both competing for attention with the administration's stated goal of focusing on the Indo-Pacific region, though to date the administration has managed to deal with immediate challenges while not losing sight of the long-term priority.

Now, while the focus of this trip is the overall health, depth, and importance of the U.S.-Australian alliance, I expect to see stress placed on the expansion of alliance activities over the past several years in the Pacific, on climate, on critical-mineral cooperation, on rising ambitions in clean energy, on defense collaboration and in space.

I wouldn't necessarily expect big announcements here, but solid, steady progress in all these important areas. Expect to hear talk of the relationship as an alliance based on innovation that's grounded in job creation and generation of mutual prosperity and that is pushing into new fields, from space to clean energy to AI research to new collaborations in science and technology.

Also expect to hear more about the three pillars, especially in the economic and energy pillars, and specifically how those two pillars can work together in and across the region. What I do not expect to hear about too much, at least publicly, is security. That's because there's so much going on in the defense realm that's largely covered in other forums, because some of the enabling legislation for greater defense collaboration has not progress far enough to make announcements quite yet, and because of a desire by both Washington and Canberra to talk about the alliance in its full scope and not just as a security relationship.

But while deep collaboration and strategic alignment will be stressed publicly, behind closed doors there should be a fair amount of argy-bargy. And for those of you that don't speak Australian, that more or less translates into lively discussion and occasionally loud argument. While this is a visit celebrating the relationship, the needed lively discussion is one that asks hard questions about whether we're moving fast enough, effectively enough, and with enough resources on a number of key issues. I'd flag four areas in particular that are likely to see lively conversation.

First, on AUKUS there are a number of questions the Australians will have about the legislation in front of the U.S. Congress on technology transfer and on ship transfer legislation. On the U.S. side there will be questions about how quickly Australia is moving to identify its workforce and to build up the infrastructure around Fleet Base West in western Australia.

Both sides will want to ask some hard questions about how quickly pillar two is coming online and providing real deterrent capabilities. For critical minerals and on defense procurement President Biden said he would ask Congress to include Australia as a domestic supplier so that Australian companies can receive funding under the Inflation Reduction Act.

But it's one thing for the president to request and quite another thing for Congress to grant so there are questions about where this sits with Congress.

Third, on budgets, and particularly on defense budgets and even more specifically on acquisition, both sides have questions about whether growing ambitions are being adequately resourced and whether our systems are moving quickly enough.

And, finally, on Taiwan the U.S. and Australia are aligned in a general sense but there's a feeling in Washington that Australia's policy settings on Taiwan lag behind other American allies in the region and in Canberra there continue to be questions over how much U.S. policy on Taiwan has actually shifted and what this might mean.

Now, before handing things over to Kathryn and Jim let me just stress that this is an incredibly important relationship and one that has bipartisan and large popular support in both countries. It's also a relationship that has exploded in significance and expanded in range over the past several years.

It is important because it is such a productive relationship and it's one that points the way for other U.S. alliances. But huzzahs and warm feelings – and maybe even a sighting of Barbie at the state dinner – shouldn't distract from the fact that most of the work on defense, on climate change, on clean energy, and on critical minerals lies in front of us.

The critical question I really would underscore is not how aligned Australia and the United States now find each other but whether the

ambitious goals that both Washington and Canberra have laid out can come online fast enough.

And with that, I'd like to hand it over to Kathryn.

Kathryn Paik: Thanks, Charlie.

So Charlie did a great job scoping out the broad contours of this visit and its significance, and I'll take a little look at how this visit is both a statement of the closeness of U.S.-Australian ties but also really an opportunity to advance areas of mutual interest and I think nowhere is this more true than in both countries' efforts in the Indo-Pacific.

So if we consider the Indo-Pacific strategy there's a clear emphasis on the importance of allies and partners to U.S. strategy in the region and Australia is one of the most critical and indispensable of those allies.

So in that light I really see this visit as exemplifying not just the strength of the bilateral relationship, which is, of course, significant, but also the increasing alignment and convergence of U.S. and Australian views and efforts across the Indo-Pacific and two areas to really watch in this space are Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

So, first, considering Southeast Asia and activities there, Australia and the U.S. are extremely aligned on the importance of ASEAN centrality and strengthening Southeast Asia institutions. For example, over this past year we've seen initiatives like Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 and Australia's Partnership for Infrastructure, or P4I. It is also very significant, I think, that the only countries with which ASEAN has elevated its relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership are Australia, the U.S., and China.

So when we talk about ambitions for the U.S.-Australia alliance in Southeast Asia I would expect to see increased cooperation on clean energy transition, especially given its new focus as an alliance pillar. I'd also expect to see increased cooperation between the U.S. and Australia and potentially other countries like Japan and the Mekong. This is a region that faces immense challenges in protecting water resources, preventing transnational crime, and ensuring energy security.

Australia's Mekong-Australia Partnership complements and reinforces work that the U.S. is doing through its Mekong-U.S. Partnership but I think both countries clearly recognize that greater resources and action will be needed in this region.

I think it will also be critical to watch how both countries respond to China's increasingly aggressive activity in the South China Sea. The U.S. is likely to push Australia to be more vocal and active in this space as there is real opportunity here to demonstrate a united voice in opposition to these actions.

We might see increased cooperation through security cooperation activities aimed at strengthening the resilience and capacity of Southeast Asian countries such as joint patrols, coast guard cooperation, et cetera.

Turning the Pacific, I think when we look at the maritime domain, perhaps nowhere in the world is the U.S.-Australia cooperation more critical than in the Pacific Islands. This is a region that covers more than 20 percent of the Earth's surface, after all. The Pacific has been a strategic priority for Australia for a long time, but U.S. commitment to the region has not always been as consistent. However, in the last few years, we've seen real, positive trajectory in the U.S. engagement in the Pacific. And this has also been accompanied by a shift in the way that the U.S. and Australia are cooperating in the region.

And something that's really energized this increased U.S. Australia cooperation is the realization by both of our countries that the challenges facing the Pacific are immense, and more than just any one partner can possibly take on. I think a clear example of this cooperation has been Australia's strong support for the drastic increase in U.S. engagement with the Pacific Islands Forum, or the PIF, of which Australia's, of course, a member, including the recent leader-level U.S.-PIF summit in Washington, D.C. And significantly, this was the second meeting between President Biden and Pacific leaders in just two years. We've also seen increased cooperation between the U.S. and Australia in helping to shape the way that international partners engage in the Pacific. For example, both countries were founding members of the Partners in the Blue Pacific, which aims to better coordinate partner activities with the PIF.

But while leader-level engagement and summits are important, of course, what is more important is follow through. And here we have to turn to the U.S. Compact of Free Association, or COFA, with Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Federated States of Micronesia. I expect that Australia, along with the entire Pacific, is keenly watching to see if U.S. Congress will fully fund the renewals of the COFA agreements this year. Another country that will most certainly be watching COFA funding is China. If the U.S. fails to renew these compacts, it would be a devastating blow to U.S. presence and influence in the region, and this is something that China would be sure to exploit. So a lot of eyes on this.

Beyond following through with commitments, I see several other key challenges and opportunities for the alliance in the Pacific. One is Papua New Guinea. The U.S.-Papua New Guinea relationship has broadened to new heights this past year with the signing of the defense cooperation agreement and the shiprider agreements. However, this is also a country where Australia has long been very present and engaged, and one where we see increased Chinese interest, especially in security and telecommunication sectors. So moving forward, I would expect to see real effort to increase cooperation between Australia in the U.S. and Papua New Guinea, hopefully in a way that prioritizes the strategic significance of Papua New Guinea in the region.

Another key challenge in the Pacific, perhaps the greatest one, of course, is climate change. And while both the U.S. and Australian governments currently consider climate change a key issue for their administration, the Pacific is also very aware that both U.S. and Australia commitment on climate has been periodic. The onus is therefore on the U.S. and Australia to prove their commitment not just to mitigation on a global level, of course, but also to resilience and adaptation for countries that are most affected by climate change, such as those in the Pacific. So overall, a lot to watch here on what this visit means for our cooperation more broadly in the Indo Pacific. I think Charlie really hit the nail on the head when he said that the main question was not how aligned we are, but how quickly the alliance will realize the ambitious goals that Washington and Canberra have laid out.

So with that, I'll turn it over to Jim.

James Carouso: Thanks, Kathryn. I think it's important to keep in mind that this state visit came in the aftermath of President Biden's cancellation of his visit to Australia in May for the Quad, due to the debt ceiling negotiations that were ongoing. And this administration, especially as tried to make – show how important alliances are and pay attention to this. And Asia specifically is a long-term effort of U.S. administrations to show that the U.S. cares about the region. Hence, the pivot under the Obama administration. So this invitation is not just an indication of the importance of the bilateral alliance, but the importance of the region to the United States.

Part of this, of course, is to continue to show the U.S. is a reliable ally going forward, especially in terms of AUKUS as a long-term, multi-generation effectively, plan to work together on defense and security. So this is important, especially now as the House of Representatives continues to struggle to come together, choose a speaker, and start

funding things like not just Ukraine, help to Israel, but also approved the transfer of ships to – submarines, rather – to Australia.

For Australia, as Charlie mentioned, the Labor Party lost its key challenge of getting the Voice over the line. Now this state visit is the next big thing for the prime minister, and hopefully he will be able to show some progress – whether it's in AUKUS or economic cooperation or science cooperation – to show positive momentum in the face of the recent negative results that were achieved.

There clearly is some frustration at the slow pace of U.S. action on removing things like export regulations for defense materiel. You saw Ambassador Rudd last week question why it's so slow at a conference in Washington. But regardless of this, we do not expect, as Charlie said, any major announcements coming out of this meeting, although there will be probably some less significant, nevertheless, say, important-ish areas of cooperation on space, critical minerals Pacific Islands, green energy, that sort of thing to try and show some forward momentum.

Prime Minister Albanese is most likely looking for something that's positive, maybe on the economic front, given that the concerns in Australia right now seem to be focused on the Australian economy and cost of living.

The other area that probably the president and the prime minister will discuss is the mooted visit of the prime minister to China. This will probably take place in advance of the APEC meetings at the end of November. This will give them a chance to discuss the issue we're all wrestling with, which is the rise of China, how to deal with Xi. And they'll probably come through on that, as well as on issues related to Ukraine and Israel-Gaza.

So there's a lot on the agenda. But that said, as Charlie indicated, I don't think we expect any big bombshell announcements out of this.

Well, I'll turn it back over to Paige.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you so much, Jim. Thank you, Kathryn. Thank you, Charlie. Really appreciate all of your insights and analysis.

At this time, I want to open it up to those of you who have dialed in for Q&A. So I'll quickly flip it back to our operator, who can let everyone know how to queue up for questions.

Operator: And thank you.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

One moment, please, for our first question.

(Pause.)

OK. Thank you. OK. Thank you. First, we'll go to the line of Tom Minear, News Corp Australia. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi, all. Thanks for doing this. It's really helpful.

I had a couple of questions, one maybe for Kathryn just to her comments but really to all of you. I know sort of going back a few years sort of just really previous to the Biden administration there was sort of occasional frustration and criticism in Australia that the U.S. would, you know, make the Indo-Pacific a real priority and would talk about that, but we kind of didn't necessarily see the action that we'd like from that. Obviously, that's shifted a bit under the current administration. But I'm just interested in whether now, with Israel to deal with on top of Ukraine, whether you think there's a risk that this kind of distracts the Biden administration from the importance of the issues in our region, whether that kind of has an impact in kind of the focus that's required.

And secondly, just on a slightly lighter note, Charles, I know you mentioned – (laughs) – whether we'd have Barbie appearing at the state dinner. Do you have any particular intel, or is it just we're just hoping for a Barbie sighting?

Ms. Montfort: (Laughs.) Kathryn, would you like to get started with the first question and then flip it over to Charlie?

Ms. Paik: Yes, certainly. Will do. Thanks so much for that question.

So, you know, I think we've really seen the ability of the administration to continue to maintain focus on the Indo-Pacific more broadly, but also the Pacific more specifically, even with all of the demands of Ukraine and elsewhere in the world. I mean, the biggest example of this would, of course, be the leader-level summit that just occurred last month here in Washington, D.C., which was a wonderful success.

I also think a lot of the specific measures that the administration has looked to take over the last couple of years point to this as well in terms of not just making certain promises or talking about specific monetary figures, but also looking at ways to really institutionalize the presence and engagement of the U.S. in the region, such as increasing diplomatic presence, the opening of several new embassy locations, and other such

measures, which are much more difficult to shift focus away from on a periodic basis because of perhaps other things going on in the world.

Dr. Edel:

Sure, I'll jump in. And before we get to Barbie, Tom, let me just kind of underscore Kathryn's comments that I think that if you have looked at the number and the range and the significance of the, quote/unquote, "distractions" that we're talking about, they are vast. And yet the administration has been able to maintain focus and really evolve partnerships, not only between the United States and Australia, but with Japan, but with South Korea, clearly with the Philippines, as well across India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. in the Quad.

So I really do see – and I should add, too, also with European allies, with their focus on China and on the Indo-Pacific region writ large, which is all to say that they are able thus far to both respond to the immediate without taking their eyes off of the long term.

But I would also add that as the war in Ukraine has shown, as the U.S. increasingly is seeking efforts to make sure that Israel has what it needs as it fights Hamas, one of the things that has become very apparent over the last couple of years is that our defense procurement is not up to the task at this point.

CSIS has run a number of really interesting studies about just how much materiel we have on the shelves. That's true in terms of munitions. That's true in terms of a number of other military capacity. And as crises erupt around the world, and as the United States supplies more than one and backstops more than one effort, it's clear that this is increasingly a stress on U.S. defense-industrial capacity.

As to the latter, a very serious question on Barbie and whether or not Margot Robbie will be spotted in D.C., I have absolutely no intelligence for you. As far as I understand it, state visits are the most closely guarded secret of everything because it's wholly in the realm of pomp and circumstance. So, sadly, I have no intel for you.

But we will note, of course, Tom, that in all of the state visits that we've seen in the past, you have a combination of policy figures, political figures, cultural figures, athletes as well. And I guess the bar has been set very high after President Yoon of South Korea sang Don Henley's [*sic*; Don McLean's] "American Pie." We'll see what Prime Minister Albanese is up for this time around.

Q:

Thanks, Charles.

Ms. Montfort: Great. And we will go to our next question.

Operator: Thank you. Next we'll go to the line of Tim Lester, Seven Work Network – Seven Network Australia.

Please go ahead.

Q: Thank you. And thanks to CSIS and those involved for the briefing; very valuable.

A question for Charles. Charles, you spoke about a feeling in Washington that Australian policy settings lag behind other allies with regard to Taiwan. Could you expand on that for us please?

Dr. Edel: I could. And thanks very much for the question, which is obviously, I think, a contentious policy question and one that is most likely to be addressed behind closed doors.

So let me say that first when we scan the areas around the world, more specifically in the Indo-Pacific, that are hot spots and that are likely to have the highest degree of risk and danger associated with them, it's very clear in Washington right now that nothing is a higher priority than making sure that deterrence is maintained across the Taiwan Strait. And you can see that American efforts have really pulled in this direction.

Now, as to the fact that there's a feeling in Washington that the public debate, and potentially the policy settings as well in Canberra, are not as well progressed as others, I would simply point to the public statements that have come out of U.S.-Japan state visits, U.S.-Korean state visits, and visits between the Philippines and the United States, all leaning much further forward than they have in the past; while at least in public, I would note that the conversation on Taiwan is more muted in Australia than it is around another number other allies and partners in the region. The sensitivity is high in Australia on these issues, particularly in advance President – Prime Minister Albanese's trip to Beijing, as Jim was discussing. But the tensions are high everywhere around the region.

So I do expect that there will be a conversation about what more and what further the United States can expect – can do with Australia to make sure that that stability across the Taiwan Straits is maintained and how to increase deterrence of Xi Jinping. Not in the long run, but in the short run. This is something that Jim had alluded to in regards to AUKUS being a very long-term venture, which it is. But I think we all know that we have a deterrence problem that doesn't materialize round about 2035 or 2040. We have one that's staring us in the face right now.

Q: Thank you.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you so much.

I see we don't have any further questions in the queue at this time. I'd like to give everyone one or two more minutes to kind of think about that, but in the meantime I'd like to quickly flip it back to our experts to ask you all if you could kind of give us one question or one thing you're looking out for with this visit that we all should be looking out for too. And perhaps first I'll go to Charlie on that.

Dr. Edel: Paige, you're making me think because I think we all gave everyone about seven different things to look for. (Laughter.) Look, I think if I had to signal one thing that I'm really looking for, I would be quite curious about the degree to which we sense urgency surrounding the conversations. Be it on critical minerals, be it on climate change, be it on security settings, be it on space, even be it on defense, procurement. As we've all discussed previously, I think the alignment is there. The question that anyone should have is whether or not the pay scale and resources are matching the ambitions. So I think what I'm really looking for is the sense of calm but urgent tone that we have between the leaders during the visit.

Ms. Montfort: That's great. Thank you, Charlie.

Kathryn, would you like to follow up?

Ms. Paik: Sure. Sort of on that same note that Charlie mentioned, I think specifically on clean energy transition, there's just been such commitment expressed by both sides on the need for this. And for me, I'm specifically looking at what most of us are doing in Southeast Asia. So seeing the degree to which that clear alignment also manifests itself in being able to follow through with some really ambitious work that both countries are hoping to do. I think that will be really interesting to watch.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you. And I know we have one more question in the queue now, so we'll take a break from that to go over to Darlene Superville from AP.

Operator: Thank you. Your line is open.

Q: Hi. Thank you for doing this this morning and taking the question.

Just really quickly, a jumping off of what someone said earlier about the president of South Korea kind of raising the bar by singing when he was

here for his state visit. Do any of you – are any of you aware of any hidden talents that Prime Minister Albanese may have? Does he sing, does he dance, juggle? Anything like that? (Laughs.) Thank you.

Dr. Edel: Obviously, he's a man of many talents. I'm not sure I have – I have the one to quote you back, Darlene. But I will note that we do know that the prime minister is a big fan of music, of DJing. He shows up frequently at concerts in Australia. I'm not quite sure how listening translates to doing. Jim, maybe you have a better sense of that one.

Mr. Carouso: You know, I heard rumors that he went to the Elvis festival in Parkes once, but I don't know if he dressed up. (Laughter.)

Q: Thank you.

Ms. Montfort: Thanks, Darlene.

And last, I want to turn to back over to Jim briefly to return to that question of the one thing you're looking out for, the one question we should be asking in advance of this visit.

Mr. Carouso: Thanks. Just going from what Kathy and Charlie said, we've had a lot of announcements over the past few years about the relationship and what we want to do together. But now we really have to start moving and getting these implemented, whether it's infrastructure in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, whether it's getting the flow of materiel and technical cooperation on defense. Things have to start moving, because, as you see in the world today, the truly urgent issues to have can't be delayed much longer. So I think hopefully both leaders will get together and say: What can we do to really kickstart things, to get them moving?

Ms. Montfort: Excellent. Thank you so much, Jim.

And thank you, everyone, for joining us this morning. We're going to wrap up a bit early, which I think will be very helpful for Charlie who I know has to dash out to another meeting in London after this. But, again, really appreciate your time today. And please do let me know if you'd like to follow up with Charlie, with Jim, with Kathryn. I'd be happy to set that up. Again, reach out to me. My name is Paige Montfort. I'm the media relations manager here. Always happy to help. And finally, this transcript will be out within just a couple of hours today, so please look out for it.

(END.)