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President Trump's West Asia Tour: Defence Deals in Focus

The signing of major defence deals was one of the highlights of President Donald Trump's tour of West Asian nations – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), from 13-16 May 2025. This was his first foreign visit in his second term. Even during Trump's first term (2017-21), his first foreign visit was to Riyadh in May 2017.

The United States and Saudi Arabia signed defence deals worth \$142 billion, touted as the largest ever defence sales agreements in history. The deals will equip



the Saudi defence forces with key capabilities across the air force and space domains, air and missile defence, maritime and coastal security, border security, land forces modernisation, as well as information and communication systems upgrades.

The deals also included extensive capability and capacity-building support to the Saudi defence forces relating to training and military medical services. A White House Fact Sheet released on 13 May 2025 notes that Saudi Arabia continues to be the largest Foreign Military Sales (FMS) partner of the United States, with active cases valued at \$129 billion.

The multi-billion dollar defence deals signed during Trump's visit are significant as the sale of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia was banned by the US Congress in 2021 in response to the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul in October 2018. This ban was subsequently lifted in 2024.

Qatar, meanwhile, is the 12th largest FMS partner, with active cases valued at \$29 billion. Qatar is also a major non-NATO ally, a status accorded to it by the previous Biden administration in 2022. During President Trump's visit to Doha on 14 May, the US pledged to give cutting edge defence equipment to its key regional security partner. Qatar became the first international customer for the Fixed Site – Low, Slow, Small Unmanned Aerial System Integrated Defeat System (FS-LIDS), designed to counter unmanned aircraft, in a contract worth \$1 billion. The system is manufactured by the US original equipment manufacturer (OEM), Raytheon.

Qatar will be getting the General Atomics MQ-9B remotely piloted aircraft system, in a deal worth nearly \$2 billion. A statement of intent was also signed to further strengthen security partnership, worth more than \$38 billion for building future defense capabilities related to air defense and maritime security, including support for burden-sharing at Al Udeid Air Base. The Al Udeid is the largest US military base in West Asia. The previous expansion of the base, which was built in 1996, took place in 2019, to the tune of nearly \$2 billion, funded by Qatar. President Trump visited the base on 15 May and addressed US and Qatari troops.

Other multi-billion investments agreements that were signed during Trump's visits to these countries related to quantum technologies, energy security, the mining sector, commercial aviation, among others. The White House advertised these agreements as reflective of President Trump's expertise on deal-making for the benefit of the US domestic manufacturing industry which will lead to the creation of thousands of jobs.

Other geopolitical objectives driving these mega deals include the desire to hasten the normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In public remarks in Riyadh, Trump stated that it was his "fervent hope and wish" that Saudi Arabia "will soon be joining the Abraham Accords". Saudi Arabia on its part has long insisted it will recognise Israel only after the establishment of a Palestinian state based on Israel's 1967 borders. Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the October 2023 Hamas attacks, which have led to large scale death and destruction, have further complicated Saudi diplomatic options vis-à-vis Israel.

The strengthening of the America's Gulf allies militarily also comes in the backdrop of the continuing concerns related to the Iranian nuclear programme. At the Saudi-US Investment Forum in Riyadh on 13 May, Trump insisted that he wanted to make a deal with Iran but if Tehran rejected the "olive branch", the US "will have no choice but to inflict massive maximum pressure".

The US and Iran have been engaged in negotiations since 12 April 2025, with the latest (fourth) round of talks between Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff taking place in Muscat on 11 May 2025. President Trump's remarks in Doha on 15 May that the US and Iran were "getting close to maybe doing a deal ..." and that Iran has "sort of agreed to the terms" indicates that progress is being made in the negotiations on this long-standing contentious issue.

Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks in Istanbul

Russian and Ukrainian representatives are expected to discuss their ongoing military conflict in Istanbul on 16 May 2025. Crucially, this was preceded by President Putin's statement on Russia being "committed to serious negotiations with Ukraine, eliminate the root causes of the conflict and establish a long-lasting peace". His Ukrainian counterpart Zelenskyy echoed a similar sentiment by calling for a 30-days unconditional ceasefire. He also proposed a presidential-level summit with Putin. This was endorsed fully by US President Trump who hinted at joining the duo in Turkey.

As such, this first bilateral meeting between the warring sides since the conflict broke out three years ago has raised hopes of



a potential ceasefire leading to a resolution of the dispute. Notably, both Russia and Ukraine have shunned direct talks since 2022. Russia had questioned the legitimacy of President Zelenskyy to represent Ukraine. Similarly, President Zelenskyy had passed a decree prohibiting contacts with Russian personnel.

Nevertheless, the devil as always lies in the details. And the prospects of a breakthrough appear slim. Putin opting out of talks with Zelenskyy and instead sending officials to negotiate has led the latter to question the former's intent in finding a viable solution to their festering issues. In fact, Zelenskyy has even labelled the Russian delegation as "sham" and "prop". The European Union (EU), meanwhile, has accused Putin of "playing for time" while US President Donald Trump has stated that "nothing's going to happen" until a US-Russia summit takes place. The EU has also drawn up a new package of crippling sanctions targeting the Russian energy sector. This has, inevitably, led to a sharp riposte from Putin who highlighted the "anti-Russian rhetoric".

Interestingly, the Russian delegation's insistence on returning to the 2022 Istanbul negotiation framework highlights the continuing fundamental differences between Moscow and Kiev. Talks had then stalled on contentious issues such as Ukraine's neutrality, security guarantees by the permanent members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the advent of Ukraine shunning North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) membership, restrictions on Kiev's military capabilities, status of Crimea and discrimination of Russian minorities in Ukraine. These remain unresolved. Moreover, new facts on the ground in the form of Russia assimilating four provinces of Ukraine has added to the complexity matrix. The question is whether the warring sides can compromise on their perceived red lines.

Similarly, Russia's insistence on an iron-clad agreement with the US on the latter shunning military aid to Kiev apart from the lifting of American sanctions, reflects the hardening of Russian position. At the end of the day, the war in Ukraine is also rooted in the divergences between Russia and the United States about Moscow's position on the global stage. Suspensions of US seeking to contain and isolate Russia run deep in the Kremlin. Overcoming their trust deficit and mutual insecurity would be the key challenge in President Trump's much-touted Russia-US détente. Interestingly, Ukraine has expressed apprehensions of a grand bargain between Moscow and Washington at the cost of Kiev. This is particularly relevant at a time when American support remains vital for Ukraine to withstand the Russian pressure, seemingly a key factor in Zelenskyy agreeing to direct talks with Russia at Trump's behest.

Meanwhile, there appears to be a growing school of thought in Russia that a ceasefire would allow battle weary Ukrainians time to recoup and replenish. Its proponents have argued that military pressure must continue in parallel to the talks to gain maximum concessions.

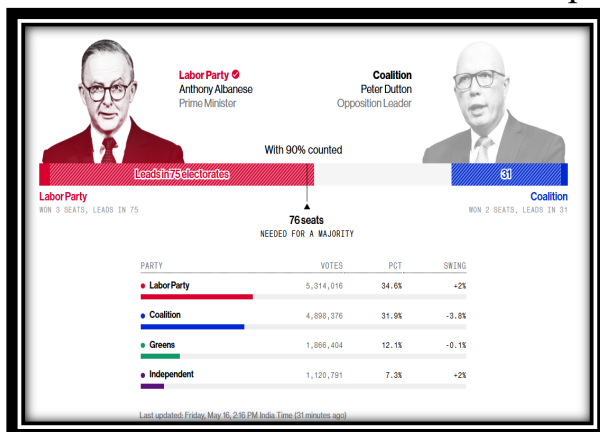
This, therefore, brings to the spotlight the timing of direct negotiations in Istanbul. Perhaps neither Ukraine nor Russia wants to project the image of prolonging the conflict amidst President Trump's seemingly growing frustration at resolving the crisis. For both Moscow and Kiev, there exists an opportunity to rest their bilateral ties with Washington – contingent on a Trump-brokered peace deal.

2025 Australian Federal Election: Domestic Determinants and Foreign Policy Implications

The May 3, 2025, federal election in Australia marked a significant shift in the political landscape. The Australian Labor Party (ALP), led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, not only secured re-election but expanded its mandate, while the Liberal Party faced a major collapse, including the loss of leader Peter Dutton's seat. This outcome reflects changing domestic sentiment and may influence Australia's domestic and foreign policy, particularly regarding its strategic posture and alliance with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.

Domestic Dynamics and Political Realignment

The decisive ALP majority—projected to exceed 90 seats in the 151-member lower house—has not occurred in a political vacuum, say domestic observers.



Media reports infer, the electorate's clear preference for continuity, coupled with its rejection of a fragmented and inconsistent Liberal campaign, indicates a maturing of voter expectations around competence, stability, and responsiveness to domestic pressures. The campaign was shaped almost entirely by economic issues: inflation, housing affordability, energy prices, and interest rates

dominated discourse. During its first term, the government's perceived steadiness and policy pragmatism won the public's trust, grappling with economic strain.

Recent debates in Australia reveal structural issues that have led to the Liberal Party's decline, now down to 24 seats from 39. Experts indicate that the loss to progressive independents and the alienation of younger, multicultural voters show the centre-right is out of touch with the changing electorate. They argue that Trump-style rhetoric has further estranged moderate Australians, who favor steady governance. Meanwhile, the Australian Labor Party's expanded majority strengthens Albanese's authority and may push policies leftward on climate, social welfare, and industrial reform.

Defence and Foreign Policy: Subdued in Campaign, Central in Governance

While national security was not a key campaign issue, the returned government's strategic challenges are significant. Australia plays a vital role in the Indo-Pacific

amid escalating Chinese assertiveness and concerns over Russian actions, as well as some doubts about U.S. reliability. Voters didn't prioritize defense, highlighting a disconnect between elite concerns and everyday anxieties. Experts suggest this context limits the government's options. Although the Albanese government supports the AUKUS agreement and aims to enhance defense capabilities, substantial increases in defense spending are unlikely soon. Incremental improvements, especially in cyber, maritime surveillance, and long-range strike, will compete with domestic budget needs. However, Albanese's stronger position allows for gradual defense reforms with less risk of immediate electoral backlash.

Foreign Policy Agenda: Continuity with people and policy

After a decisive election victory, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has unveiled a reshaped cabinet that largely maintains continuity in key portfolios while introducing strategic changes. Senior ministers—Treasurer Jim Chalmers, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Defence Minister Richard Marles, and Finance Minister Katy Gallagher—remain in place, signalling policy stability in economic and security affairs.

The election affirmed Australia's foreign policy continuity, with some subtle recalibrations expected. Albanese's upcoming visits to Jakarta and Papua New Guinea highlight the growing strategic competition in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Indonesia is becoming a key partner, especially concerning Russian interests in its military infrastructure, making defense cooperation a priority. The ALP's diplomatic approach contrasts with previous conservative governments, focusing on stabilizing relations with China while maintaining deterrence and regional engagement. Canberra continues to balance its alignment with the U.S. against economic ties with China, possibly risking tension with Washington.

U.S.–Australia Alliance: Strong but domestic headwinds

Despite these domestic developments, the U.S.–Australia alliance remains foundational say observers. The ALP's support for AUKUS, ongoing interoperability initiatives, and expanded U.S. military presence in northern Australia signal deepening defence integration. However, challenges are emerging say observers. A notable shift in Australian public opinion—marked by growing skepticism about U.S. reliability and unilateralism—was reflected in this election. The unpopularity of Donald Trump and his protectionist policies, including tariffs affecting Australian exports (and even culture, such as media content), highlight the potential for economic tension to bleed into strategic cooperation. Analysts also worry that Canberra's messaging on China and its measured pace on defence expenditure may generate frustration in Washington.

The 2025 election outcome is both a domestic political milestone and a moment of strategic recalibration. Albanese's Labor government enjoys an unprecedented mandate and the political space to act decisively on domestic reform. However, its foreign and defence policy will remain constrained by fiscal realities, public priorities, and an evolving regional threat landscape.