

New Zealand government calls for war against Syria

Tom Peters
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Addressing the United Nations General Assembly on September 30, New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully denounced the UN Security Council's failure to endorse direct imperialist intervention in Syria.

His speech made clear that New Zealand's conservative National Party government supports Washington's campaign to depose President Bashar al-Assad—an ally of Iran—and install a pro-Western regime. McCully's speech followed an even more bellicose address on September 26 by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who demanded that the UN rubber-stamp war on Syria and Iran.

McCully declared that the Council was “at risk of losing its credibility... through its inability to act.” He added: “If 25,000 deaths, countless thousands injured, and many more thousands displaced and homeless, is not enough to get the Security Council to act, then what does it take?”

The Obama administration and its allies, in Europe as well as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are directly responsible for the bloodbath in Syria. They have stoked a sectarian civil war by bankrolling, arming and training the anti-Assad “rebels” of the Free Syrian Army—a deeply divided umbrella group headed by ex-Assad regime officers—and various Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda.

A “humanitarian” intervention would support these forces against Assad, just as last year's NATO bombing campaign in Libya supported Islamist and tribal rebels to overthrow the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. That UN-backed war resulted in a death toll of over 50,000.

In a thinly veiled attack on Russia and China, McCully urged permanent Security Council members “not to use their veto in situations involving mass atrocities.” For their own geo-strategic reasons, Russia and China have vetoed resolutions designed to legitimise military intervention, first in the war against Libya and now in Syria. They also oppose the escalating US and Israeli threats against Iran—which is being targeted because it has vast oil reserves and is deemed the biggest regional obstacle to US hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia. The US is determined to gain control of the world's oil resources in order to counter its global economic decline and weaken the position of its main rivals, first and foremost China.

McCully repeated the fraudulent claim that Iran's “course” threatened a “nuclear break out” in the Middle East, and declared that “Iran must be told to step back.” In fact, Iran—unlike Israel—is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities have repeatedly uncovered no evidence of the development of nuclear weapons—any more than UN inspectors found “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq.

McCully's UN speech was undoubtedly discussed with US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, who spent two days in New Zealand a week earlier. Panetta's visit, which Prime Minister John Key said heralded a “new era” in relations with the US, was the first from a US Defence Secretary in 30 years. It followed a series of agreements establishing closer military ties with the US, as well as joint training exercises.

Over the past decade, successive NZ governments have re-established military ties with the US, after a partial rift in the mid-1980s when Wellington banned visits from nuclear armed or powered vessels. Helen Clark's Labour government—supported by the “left wing” Alliance and the Greens—sent troops to assist the invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. The current government has kept more than 100 troops in Afghanistan and is now positioning New Zealand to take part in future wars against Syria and Iran. Labour and the Greens have also stated that they would support military intervention in Syria.

During his visit, Panetta announced that the US would lift its ban on New Zealand navy ships docking in the US, and that marines would train NZ forces to “help us in providing for the security of the Asia-Pacific region.” He also told TVNZ that the Obama administration would be “more than ready” to station marines in New Zealand, as it is already doing in northern Australia.

Panetta's visit was part of Washington's increasingly aggressive efforts to contain China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Panetta travelled to New Zealand after visiting Japan and China, amid explosive tensions between the two countries over the disputed Senkaku/Daiyou islands. Panetta confirmed that if a conflict erupted, the US would not remain neutral but would intervene to defend Japan. He announced that a second X-radar station would be built in Japan as part of a US “missile shield”—ostensibly to defend the region from a North Korean nuclear strike, but in reality aimed at neutralising Chinese retaliation in the event of a conflict. The Obama administration has also strengthened its alliances with the Philippines and South Korea.

As Wellington strengthens its military ties with the US, it faces an increasingly fraught dilemma. China has become New Zealand's second largest trading partner after Australia since the signing of a free trade deal in 2008. Last year, exports to China were worth nearly \$NZ6 billion—an increase of 34 percent on the previous year. The government is also encouraging more direct investment by China. National's approval of the sale of 16 farms to a Chinese company earlier this year

exposed divisions within the ruling elite over where to line up in the rivalry between Beijing and Washington. The opposition Labour Party, the Greens, the Mana Party and New Zealand First all denounced the sale and attempted to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment.

Speaking to the *New Zealand Herald* on September 21, Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman insisted that the government did not have to “make a choice” between China and the US, adding, “we can manage our relationship with both of those countries in a way that doesn't offend either of them.” But Robert Ayson, from Wellington's Centre for Strategic Studies, warned on September 18 that the rapprochement with the US had already “increased the chances of Washington expecting New Zealand to do something if the US and China get into serious trouble.”

A September 27 editorial in *The Dominion Post* urged the government to “keep both sides happy.” The paper worried that “at some point in the future,” China and the US were “bound to fall out, and New Zealand... must guard against being put in a position where we might have to choose between them.”

McCully's speech at the UN, however—his criticism of Beijing and Moscow on behalf of Washington—demonstrates the tremendous pressure that the Obama administration is putting on every country to unconditionally align with its drive toward war with Syria, Iran and ultimately China.



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