# NZ government aligns more closely with US amid rising tensions with China

**Tom Peters**
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Last month's visit to Washington by Prime Minister John Key marked a definite shift by New Zealand's ruling elite into closer alignment with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a strategy aimed at strengthening US control over the Asia-Pacific region and preparing for war against China.

Key's meeting with President Barack Obama—his first official visit to the White House since 2011—took place amid sharpening tensions in the South China Sea. Washington has encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines to aggressively pursue their territorial disputes against China, including through the UN and international courts. Its aim is to brand Beijing as an outlaw, thereby justifying a stronger US military presence in the region.

Like other countries in the region, New Zealand is being drawn into the confrontation with Beijing. The Obama administration signed an agreement in April to station unlimited US forces in the Philippines. It is backing the re-militarisation of Japan and has promised to support Japan in the event of a war with China over disputed islands in the East China Sea. The Australian government is collaborating with the US military build-up, with agreements to station US marines in Darwin and to give the US access to naval and air bases throughout the continent.

A White House statement on June 20 declared that Key and Obama were "united in supporting ... the preservation of the freedom of navigation and overflight" in the South China Sea. It continued: "The two leaders rejected the use of intimidation, coercion, and aggression to advance any maritime claims" and called for disputes to be resolved "in accordance with international law."

While not naming China, these formulations are employed by Washington to accuse it of aggression and oppose Beijing's insistence that its maritime territorial disputes with its neighbours should be resolved via bilateral negotiations, not multilateral agencies where US interests prevail.

Until Key's trip, the National Party government had remained silent on the South China Sea disputes, as part of its attempt to balance between China, NZ's number one export market, and the US, its most important military ally. During the stand-off over China's announcement of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea last November, NZ took a neutral position. While Canberra denounced Beijing, Key called for "constructive dialogue" between Japan and China.

But eight months later, amid the explosive tensions fuelled by the US, New Zealand's ruling elite has concluded that a neutral posture is no longer tenable. Robert Ayson from Wellington's Centre for Strategic Studies—who supported the government's stance on the ADIZ—wrote on May 30 in the *Dominion Post* that NZ "needs to be prepared to disappoint China" by calling for the China-Vietnam conflict to be resolved through "the application of the Law of the Sea to maritime claims," rather than bilaterally as Beijing preferred.

The Key-Obama statement provoked some nervousness in NZ's corporate media. *New Zealand Herald* political columnist Audrey Young wrote that it "will be noted in Beijing" and Key was "at risk of making an enemy." A *Dominion Post* editorial criticised Key for joining the "aggressive American declaration ... [on] an argument in which New Zealand has no interest."

Notwithstanding such misgivings, the political and corporate establishment supports the de facto New Zealand alliance with Washington. The *Dominion Post* welcomed "Key's friendly relationship with Obama,"

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even as it worried that “negotiating a path” between the US and China would become “trickier as tensions rise.”

Opposition Labour Party leader David Cunliffe told TVNZ on June 22 that New Zealand had “important security and economic ties” with the US. He praised Key’s close relationship with Obama and vowed to continue strengthening relations.

Labour and the Greens both made clear that they would support US military intervention in Iraq, as long as it had the fig leaf of UN approval. The last Labour government deployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan in the face of widespread public opposition.

Key underlined his backing for US war plans in every part of the world. During a joint press conference with Secretary of State John Kerry on June 20, Key declared that he supported “100 percent” the deployment of 300 US military “advisors” to Iraq. The next day, following an 80-minute meeting with Obama, Key said he would back US air strikes against the insurgency led by the Sunni extremist group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Obama told the media “the US-New Zealand relationship has never been stronger.” The White House statement applauded NZ’s “strong position” on “Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea, the conflict and ensuing humanitarian tragedy in Syria, and the continuing provocative actions of North Korea.”

Key has previously stated that he would join a US-led attack on North Korea. His government, along with Labour and the Greens, denounced Russia and China for using their UN Security Council votes to oppose a direct attack on Syria. NZ’s parliament unanimously condemned the annexation of Crimea and supported the US puppet government in Ukraine, which was installed in a fascist-led coup.

The Key government is also complicit in illegal US drone killings, including an attack in Yemen last year that killed New Zealander Daryl Jones and four other people. Jones had been under surveillance by the NZ spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB). Asked if intelligence gathered by the GCSB could help plan drone strikes in Iraq, Key told TV3: “It’s possible.”

The GCSB is part of the Five Eyes alliance, led by the US National Security Agency, which includes the spy agencies of Britain, Canada and Australia. While in the US, according to TV3, Key received an intelligence briefing from “multiple agencies and members of Mr Obama’s national security staff, the National Security Council.”

New Zealand joined this year’s US-led RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) naval exercise for the first time in 30 years. The White House declared this was “a symbol of our renewed engagement on mutual defense and security.” The exercise followed last year’s Operation Southern Katipo, a major exercise involving US troops in NZ’s South Island.

The political establishment’s embrace of US warmongering is driven by definite financial and strategic interests. While NZ’s agricultural exports largely go to China, agriculture makes up just over 5 percent of gross domestic product. The finance, insurance and business services sector is far larger, contributing 28.8 percent. The major banks are all Australian owned and heavily dependent on Wall Street.

Since World War II, New Zealand’s ruling elite has relied on the US to support its own imperialist interests in the Pacific, where NZ faces increasing competition from China.

Key’s trip coincided with the release of a report on New Zealand’s “peacekeeping” operations, written by foreign affairs, defence and police staff. The partly redacted report said the military should actively “seek opportunities” to work with Australia, the US, Britain and Canada. NZ troops had to be ready to deploy at “short notice” to countries, including those in the South Pacific that “face chronic social, economic, environmental and governance stresses.”

Regardless of which party wins the September 20 national election, the NZ ruling class is prepared to drag the population into US-led wars in Asia, and around the world, in order to protect its wealth and its predatory neo-colonial interests.

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