

# Chinese president visits New Zealand

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Chinese President Xi Jinping visited New Zealand last month following the G20 summit in Australia. Xi signed 10 agreements, mostly related to trade and investment, with Prime Minister John Key's National Party government. The two leaders re-affirmed an agreement to increase annual two-way trade by 50 percent to \$30 billion by 2020. Chinese business leaders in Xi's delegation reached 17 commercial partnerships and agreements with NZ companies.

Xi's visit was part of Beijing's efforts to counter the US "pivot to Asia"—a strategy to militarily encircle and prepare for war against China in order to secure US hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region. Washington has strengthened military ties with countries throughout the region including Japan, Australia and the Philippines. US President Barack Obama delivered a bellicose speech while in Australia at the G20 summit, making clear that Washington would intensify its provocations against China.

The Chinese government is seeking to counter Washington by expanding aid, trade and investment in the Asia Pacific. According to analysis by the Australian National University, in just two weeks—from the opening of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit on November 10 through Xi's visits to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji—Beijing announced \$70 billion in loans and infrastructure for the region.

Following the G20 summit President Xi signed a lucrative free trade deal with Australia and told the country's parliament to be "on high alert for factors that may deprive us of peace"—an obvious reference to the US military build-up, which Canberra fully supports.

Before arriving in New Zealand, Xi published an "open letter" in local newspapers, noting that NZ was "the first developed country to have signed and implemented a free trade deal with China" six years ago. Since then NZ agricultural exports to China have

grown rapidly and this year China became NZ's number one trading partner.

Xi called for the two countries to pursue "even stronger co-operation in all fields." He congratulated the Key government on its recent election to the UN Security Council and declared that Beijing was "ready to increase co-operation" with New Zealand in the UN, APEC, and the Pacific Islands Forum.

Xi's visit highlighted tensions within New Zealand's political establishment. While the National government has endorsed the US "pivot" and strengthened the military-intelligence alliance with Washington, it continues to focus on building economic relations with China. Ministers have repeatedly insisted that New Zealand does not need to "choose" between the two countries.

However, this balancing act has become increasingly difficult to maintain amid rising geo-political tensions and US pressure to fully commit to its militarist agenda. Since 2012 the government's ties with China have come under sustained attack from the opposition Labour Party and its allies—the Greens, the right-wing populist NZ First and the Maori nationalist Mana Party. These parties and sections of the corporate media favour unconditional alignment with US imperialism against China.

This year the opposition and the media whipped up "corruption" scandals to force the resignation of two government ministers—Judith Collins and Maurice Williamson—who had close personal links to Chinese business figures.

*New Zealand Herald* business columnist Fran O'Sullivan wrote on November 22 that Xi's visit was a "strategic" attempt to counter this anti-Chinese politics by forging stronger ties with the Key government. She noted that "the Chinese embassy is known to have been concerned at the stoking of anti-China sentiment at the beginning of the recent election campaign."

During their campaign for the September 20 election, the opposition parties mounted a chauvinist campaign denouncing the sale of farmland to a Chinese company. Labour, NZ First and Mana also scapegoated immigrants, particularly those from China and other parts of Asia, for the high cost of housing, unemployment and other symptoms of New Zealand's social and economic crisis.

The *Herald* reported that during Xi's visit Key criticised the opposition's campaign against Chinese land purchases, telling a Federated Farmers meeting that "contrary to public opinion" hardly any farms were owned by Chinese investors, compared with those from countries including the US and Germany.

Asked by reporters if he supported calls for democratic reforms in China, Key told a press conference that this was a "matter for the people of China... and whatever system they have, we will support them in that."

Xi made overtures to the Labour Party, describing it as a "trail blazer" for organising the free trade agreement when it was last in office. Labour leader Andrew Little, however, was less diplomatic, telling Radio NZ that he would speak to Xi about "what happens when they [Chinese investors] purchase land" in NZ. He added that he would raise China's "ongoing human rights records, particularly the suppression of freedom of speech and freedom of information."

Labour's allies openly attacked the government's ties with China. NZ First leader Winston Peters declared to TVNZ: "The question is, how much control of our destiny are we losing?" He said NZ was "more dependent now on China than we'd like to be," while exports as a share of gross domestic product had recently declined from 33 to 29 percent.

Greens co-leader Russel Norman similarly criticised the government for focusing too heavily on exports of dairy products to China. He also declared that the Chinese government was "guilty of policies that have displaced and marginalised" the peoples of Tibet and Xinjiang. He called on Prime Minister Key to "follow the lead of United States President Barack Obama" and push for the release of Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, who has been in prison since 2008.

Beijing's policies in Tibet, Xinjiang and elsewhere are thoroughly repressive. However the opposition parties' professed concern for "human rights" is

thoroughly hypocritical, and has everything to do with "following the lead" of US imperialism. Washington routinely and cynically uses the issue of "human rights" to justify its military preparations against China as well as interventions in other parts of the world.

The 1999–2008 Labour government was responsible for cementing military and intelligence ties with Washington by sending troops to assist the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Greens vocally supported the so-called "peacekeeping" mission in Afghanistan, where NZ soldiers were part of the US occupation force for more than a decade. Labour has joined the National government in expressing support for the renewed US intervention in Iraq and Syria this year.

While the National government has so far been careful to avoid jeopardising its lucrative relationship with China, it is no less committed to an alliance with US imperialism. The NZ bourgeoisie relies on Washington to safeguard NZ's own neo-colonial interests in the Pacific, where Wellington increasingly views Beijing as a rival for influence. Despite the public display of friendship during Xi's visit, the Key government is intimately involved in US military operations in every part of the world, including Asia.



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