

New Zealand defence minister blames Beijing for South China Sea tension

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In a speech to the NZ Institute of International Affairs on August 25, New Zealand's Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee discussed the rising tension in the South China Sea, which he attributed to China's land reclamation activities.

"While we take no position on the various claims in the South China Sea, New Zealand opposes actions that undermine peace and erode trust," Brownlee declared.

During a visit to Beijing last October, Brownlee raised concerns with Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman, General Fan Changlong, over the reclamation of 2,500 hectares in the South China Sea.

In last month's speech, Brownlee asserted that the reclamations would "be a considerably greater area now." He claimed Fan had "accepted the scale of all this was bound to cause some excitement." Brownlee added: "Another word for it is tension, which these developments continue to cause."

Brownlee's comments indicate a shift by a section of the government and ruling elite closer to Washington's belligerent anti-China position. In an attempt to maintain a balance between China, its second most important trading partner and the US, its major strategic ally, the New Zealand government has insisted that it did not "take sides" over the South China Sea.

In mid-July, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague backed the Philippines in a legal case over the disputed waters, ruling that reefs and atolls controlled by China could not be used as the basis of territorial claims. China rejected the court's jurisdiction, but Brownlee explicitly endorsed it, saying: "We support the right of states to access dispute settlement mechanisms in managing complex issues."

The Hague case was orchestrated by the US as a pretext to extend its military build-up and preparations for war with China. Condemning China's "illegal

activities," the US is preparing further provocative "freedom of navigation" operations, including by its allies, into Chinese-claimed territorial waters. These operations have nothing to do with protecting regional trade, but seek to ensure access for US warships and aircraft in the strategically sensitive waters.

Noting the "growing economic might of China and its emergence as a military big power," Brownlee said "we are seeing increasing challenges to the international rules-based order," which New Zealand had "a strong interest in supporting." He said this was the prime reason NZ had sought a seat on the UN Security Council. The call for a "rules-based order" echoes US demands for a global order in which Washington sets and enforces the rules.

Following The Hague ruling, US Vice President Joe Biden visited Australia and New Zealand. NZ Foreign Minister Murray McCully had earlier given what the *Dominion Post* described as a "nuanced" response to the ruling. Ostensibly leaving the door open for limited concessions to China, he said it provided a "platform" for resolving the "longstanding and complex issues in the South China Sea."

Before flying into Wellington, however, Biden delivered a menacing speech in Sydney. He laid down the law to Australia and other regional allies, making it clear that Washington expects their unequivocal support in its deepening confrontation with China. Biden said the US would use its "unparalleled" military strength to maintain its dominant position in the Asia-Pacific.

In New Zealand, Biden formally accepted an invitation from Prime Minister John Key for the US Navy to send a warship to the NZ Navy's 75th anniversary celebrations in November. This will be the first visit by a US warship since the New Zealand's

“anti-nuclear” legislation was enacted in 1984. Key said it would be “a further demonstration of the strength of our close relationship, our friendship and our shared values.” Brownlee repeated Key’s enthusiasm for the US response.

While criticising China, Brownlee used his speech to emphasise New Zealand’s “deep historical ties” with the US. “Our relationship, which dates back almost 180 years, has seen us work together in two world wars and in all the major conflicts in between and thereafter,” he said. Brownlee highlighted “our shared experience in Afghanistan—a country where we both still deploy troops.”

The New Zealand Defence White Paper, released on June 8, marked a major step in the country’s integration into US war plans, which has proceeded behind the backs of the population and in defiance of widespread anti-war sentiment. Brownlee stated at the time that \$NZ20 billion worth of planned upgrades to frigates, planes and land vehicles would make NZ forces “interoperable ... with our close partners,” particularly the US and Australia.

In line with the White Paper, Brownlee last week announced the signing of a \$NZ36 million contract with Boeing to upgrade the air force’s underwater intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability, and tenders for a new naval ship to support littoral operations. These measures are directly related to the escalating arms race between Beijing and Washington and its allies, in which naval supremacy is a central focus.

Every party in the New Zealand parliament supports the alliance with US imperialism. Labour Party leader Andrew Little told the Institute of International Affairs in July it was “strongly in New Zealand’s interests that we have deep, friendly military co-operation with the US.” The forthcoming US naval visit has been welcomed by the Greens and Greenpeace, highlighting the further shift to the right by former anti-war protest leaders, who have embraced imperialist war.

Labour and the Maori nationalist Mana Party—which includes the pseudo-left groups Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa—have joined the anti-immigrant NZ First Party in seeking to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia. Their scapegoating of China for the NZ’s speculative housing bubble, unemployment and underfunded public services, along with trade union allegations of Chinese

steel “dumping,” dovetails with New Zealand’s growing integration into Washington’s military build-up against China.

Brownlee concluded his speech by noting that New Zealand was “acutely aware of the dynamic between China and the United States,” and insisted yet again that “we do not see our defence relationships as mutually exclusive.”

New Zealand’s increasingly explicit orientation toward Washington has not gone unnoticed in Beijing. On the eve of Key’s official visit there in April, China’s state news agency Xinhua warned New Zealand to take an independent stance on the South China Sea, rather than be “hijacked by the ambitions of its military allies.”

“New Zealand is an absolute outsider” in the dispute and “not a concerned party,” Xinhua declared. It warned that any attempt by Wellington to break its promise not to take sides would “risk complicating the flourishing trade ties between China and New Zealand.”



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