

US secretary of state visits New Zealand to counter China

Tom Peters
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US secretary of state Rex Tillerson landed in New Zealand on June 6 for talks with Prime Minister Bill English, Foreign Minister Gerry Brownlee and Defence Minister Mark Mitchell. They reportedly discussed the US wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, as well as North Korea and China.

The previous day, Tillerson and US Defence Secretary James Mattis held talks with their counterparts in Australia, where Tillerson denounced China for “militarising islands in the South China Sea” and “failure to put appropriate pressure on North Korea” to denuclearise. A joint US-Australian statement affirmed support for “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea, where Washington has provocatively sent navy vessels into waters claimed by China.

In the past, New Zealand’s National Party government had been wary of alienating China, NZ’s largest trading partner. Wellington has claimed it does not “take sides” between the US and China. This has changed as Obama’s administration, and now Trump’s, became increasingly reckless in their threats against China and North Korea.

Tillerson told a press conference in Wellington that he and English were “of one mind ... in conveying to China that these actions they’re taking to build islands and, more alarmingly, to militarise these islands threatens the stability” of the region. He reiterated the Trump administration’s threat to North Korea, calling on “all nations” to put “pressure on the regime in Pyongyang” to abandon its nuclear program.

During a meeting last month with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, English emphasised New Zealand’s support for the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on the South China Sea disputes. The ruling was heavily weighted in

favour of a US-backed case brought by the Philippines against Chinese claims.

A spokesman for China’s foreign ministry denounced the Japan-New Zealand statement as “inappropriate” and called on “countries outside the region” to “treat the South China Sea issue objectively and rationally, [and] not allow themselves to be taken advantage by other countries.”

The meetings with Abe and Tillerson underscore New Zealand’s increasing incorporation into the US build-up against China.

Despite its small size and remoteness, New Zealand is a valued US ally. Speaking to the National Press Club in Australia on June 7, former US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper emphasised that “the restoration of New Zealand as full-fledged intelligence partners [during the 1999–2008 Labour Party government] demonstrably strengthened intelligence sharing among the Five Eyes nations, and has accrued to our great mutual benefit.”

Whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed in 2015 that New Zealand’s Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) spies on China and other countries in Asia and the Pacific. Vast quantities of communications are intercepted by the GCSB’s Waihopai satellite base in the South Island and passed directly to the US National Security Agency.

Tillerson and English also discussed a US request for New Zealand to send more troops to Afghanistan. New Zealand currently has 10 soldiers there and is likely send two more. Successive Labour and National governments have sent hundreds of troops to Afghanistan, including the elite Special Air Service, which has been implicated in war crimes against civilians.

There are more than 100 NZ troops in Iraq and

English has indicated he would be willing to send troops to Syria if requested by the US.

Behind the backs of the working class, the ruling elite is preparing the country to join Washington's war plans. Last year the government pledged to spend an extra \$20 billion on the military to make it "interoperable" with US forces. The opposition Labour and Green Parties supported the massive spending, while NZ First called for even more funds and recruitment into the armed forces to counter China's presence in the Pacific.

The Greens and Labour made no criticism of US threats against China and North Korea or the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Labour leader Andrew Little, who had his own private meeting with Tillerson, told Newstalk ZB he wanted the US "to maintain good relations with New Zealand, with Australia, with other South Pacific nations. It's very important for our sense of stability and peace."

Little, echoing much of the media commentary, expressed concern that Trump's "America First" policy could signal a withdrawal from the region. He warned that "in the South Pacific, we know that there are other countries that are seeking to have an influence."

Since the end of World War II the ruling class has relied on its alliance with the US to support its own neo-colonial sphere of influence in the South Pacific. It is concerned about growing Chinese economic influence in countries like Fiji, Samoa and Tonga.

Among the broader population, however, there is widespread hostility toward the military-intelligence alliance with the US. Thousands of people joined protests against Trump's inauguration.

Several reporters noted that members of the public held up their middle finger to Tillerson's motorcade as it drove through Wellington. *New York Times* correspondent Gardiner Harris commented: "I've been in motorcades for a couple of years now... I've never seen so many people flip the bird at an American motorcade as I saw today."

A survey of over 34,000 people by Fairfax Media and Massey University, published the day before Tillerson's visit, found that "when asked to choose between building closer bilateral relations with the US, the UK and China, only 15.6 percent chose the US." By contrast, "China came out tops, with 42.5 percent

backing, while 42 percent said the United Kingdom."

Another poll by TVNZ in April found overwhelming opposition to sending New Zealand troops to Syria.

These findings stand in stark contrast to the position of the opposition parties. Labour, New Zealand First and the Maori nationalist Mana Party have run a xenophobic, anti-Chinese campaign for the past five years, aimed at pressuring the government to align more explicitly with Washington against Beijing.

Labour and its allies have scapegoated immigrants, especially Chinese people, for the lack of affordable housing, unemployment and putting pressure on public infrastructure. They have attacked the government for allowing Chinese steel imports and investment in agriculture.

Whichever party or parties take office after the September 23 national election, the next government will continue to strengthen the alliance with the US, intensify nationalist and xenophobic propaganda and the preparations for war.



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