

Campaign continues over “Chinese influence” in New Zealand

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While New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and other senior members of the new Labour-led government attended the recent Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders’ gathering and East Asia Summit (EAS) in Vietnam and the Philippines, an ongoing campaign against so-called Chinese “influence” in the country’s political and business affairs was ramped up.

The purpose of the anti-China campaign, which peaked during the September 23 election, is to further align the country’s defence and foreign policy with Washington. The Trump administration is demanding that all countries in the Asia-Pacific fall in with its advanced preparations for war against North Korea and confrontation with China.

US ambassador to NZ Scott Brown used several media interviews in the wake of the poll to ensure that the incoming government backed the US war drive. He openly rebuked former National Party prime minister Bill English for appearing to waver over Trump’s confrontation with North Korea and emphasised New Zealand’s importance as a partner in the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network.

The media, working with Washington-based think tanks, the Wilson Center and Jamestown Foundation, meanwhile stirred up virulent anti-Chinese propaganda. A widely-publicised report by the Wilson Center’s Anne-Marie Brady, published days before the election, claimed National was beholden to Chinese business interests. It alleged, without any evidence, that National Party MP Jian Yang and Labour MP Raymond Huo were “agents” of the Chinese Communist Party.

Brady, billed as an academic “expert” based at NZ’s Canterbury University, called for the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) to carry out a sweeping investigation of Chinese “influence” in New Zealand politics. The right-wing NZ First Party, now a partner in the new government, echoed Brady’s demands and called for

Yang to step down while an “inquiry” was conducted. Ardern indicated she would consider empowering the SIS to investigate Chinese “influence,” as Australia’s intelligence agency is now doing.

The first item on Labour’s legislative agenda was to ban foreigners from buying houses—a move calculated to stoke xenophobia. While in opposition, Labour and NZ First repeatedly scapegoated foreigners, especially Chinese immigrants, who make up about 4 percent of the population, for the housing crisis, low wages and other social problems. Ardern intends to cut migrant and foreign student numbers by up to 30,000 a year, or 40 percent.

Last week Brady released a fresh “policy brief” demanding the government proceed with a raft of anti-China measures. “It is time to face up to some of the political differences and challenges in the New Zealand-China relationship, including the impact on our democracy of Chinese political interference,” Brady declared.

Brady alleged, again without substantiation, that China’s “covert, corrupting and coercive political influence activities in New Zealand are now at a critical level.” Under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping, Brady claimed, Beijing has been more assertive and was seeking to become a “global great power and is seeking change in the global order.”

Such claims turn reality on its head. American imperialism, seeking to overcome its economic decline, has for the past 25 years used its overwhelming military might to foment a series of wars around the globe and is now threatening nuclear catastrophe.

In this increasingly volatile global situation, New Zealand’s ruling class has sought to balance its economic links with China, its second largest trading partner, against its military and diplomatic ties with Australia and the US, which it requires to protect its own neo-colonial

interests in the Pacific.

Brady borrowed a Chinese diplomatic phrase—to “light a new stove”—to demand the government end any prevarication and institute a sweeping witch-hunt. Her policy prescriptions, which undoubtedly had Washington’s input, include investigations by both the SIS and Prime Minister’s department into China’s “subversion and espionage activities in New Zealand,” as well as its “political influence activities.”

Brady further demands the Commerce Commission investigate the Chinese Communist Party’s so-called “interference” in the local Chinese language media sector and for the attorney general to draft new laws on political donations and “foreign influence activities.” Parliament is called on to pass anti-money laundering and terrorism financing legislation, including in New Zealand’s Pacific territories. The government is urged to make appointments to “strategically important” groups that “help shape” China policy, such as the NZ China Council.

Brady told *Newsroom* on November 14 that New Zealand should work with “like-minded countries”—specifically Canada and Australia—on investigations into Chinese influence. She stated: “We would be very unusual amongst our allies if we don’t address this issue.” Brady told TVNZ’S “Q+A” program: “This is not the time to head-butt China.” The investigations, she warned, should be handled “carefully” and conducted behind closed doors. “These are sensitive topics and we certainly don’t want to stir up racism,” she declared hypocritically.

Brady has a vociferous ally in the *Daily Blog*, which is the central mouthpiece of the trade unions, which oppose immigration and Asian investment. A November 14 post by editor Martyn Bradbury absurdly asserted: “The truth is that we are economically occupied by China.” He then claimed that in Beijing’s looming conflict with the US over the Pacific, “they intend to push their interests aggressively as they seek to become the dominant force in our region.”

The government’s involvement in the APEC and EAS summits underlined the shift now under way. In Manila, Ardern issued a statement highlighting “the need for all actions short of military action” when it came to North Korea.

Interviewed by TV3, Ardern said New Zealand will “intervene in North Korea if backed by a United Nations resolution.” The increase in testing and capability of the tests conducted by North Korea show there is a “genuine threat” coming from the country, Ardern claimed. She

added that every world leader needs to “put pressure on Pyongyang to make sure they are responding to the sanctions and messages coming from the international community.”

Ardern also set out New Zealand’s position on the South China Sea dispute, claiming its opposition to Chinese territorial claims is based on international law and through consensus on a “code of conduct.” These terms echo the “rules based order” invoked by the US—whereby it sets the “rules”—to assert its interests against China in the region.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported on November 15 that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had twice sought out Foreign Minister Winston Peters during the summits to discuss “a mystery project about the Asia-Pacific region.” The report prompted speculation that this involved North Korea, which Peters visited in 2007. In his first press conference as foreign minister, Peters had said: “We do not think that North Korea is an utterly hopeless case.”

On the economic front, Ardern reversed Labour’s previous opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). She fell into line with Japan’s efforts, supported by Australia, to re-forge the TPP without the US or China. Under the Obama administration, the TTP was designed to exclude Beijing until it deregulated protected sectors of its domestic economy. Trump repudiated the TPP upon taking office, on the protectionist grounds that it gave member-countries greater access to American markets.

There is no doubt that New Zealand will come under further pressure to join Japan, Australia and India to support the “Quadrilateral” alliance proposed by the US, to consolidate a military and strategic “Indo-Pacific” bloc to confront China and shatter its growing regional and international influence.



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