

New Zealand's "Pacific reset" aims to reassert imperialist dominance

Tom Peters**12 March 2018**

A five-day tour by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of four small and impoverished Pacific island countries has been seized on by the corporate media to once again glorify the Labour Party-led government.

From March 5 to 10, Ardern visited Samoa, Tonga, Niue and the Cook Islands, accompanied by deputy prime minister and NZ First leader Winston Peters, coalition partner and Green Party leader James Shaw, and opposition National Party foreign affairs spokesman Gerry Brownlee.

TVNZ reporter Barbara Dreaver said Ardern "really shined" and was "liked enormously by the locals." Peters was supposedly "greeted like a hero." Newshub's Lloyd Burr gushed that Arden showed "the incredible ability to captivate audiences by firstly disarming them with charm and then killing them with kindness." Small sums of aid were announced, including an extra \$10 million for Tonga's rebuilding after Cyclone Gita, which left thousands homeless last month.

The predictable and sickening media frenzy could not conceal the purpose of the high-powered tour: to reassert New Zealand imperialism's dominance in the southwest Pacific and push back against China. In recent years, Samoa, Tonga and other Pacific countries have received hundreds of millions of dollars in aid, infrastructure investment and loans from Beijing, outstripping that provided by Australia and New Zealand.

Four days before the Pacific tour, Peters delivered a speech at the Australian strategic think tank, the Lowy Institute, declaring that the Labour-NZ First-Greens government would "embark on a new, re-energised Pacific strategy."

The Pacific, he warned, was "an increasingly contested strategic space, no longer neglected by Great Power ambition, and so Pacific Island leaders have more options. This is creating strategic anxiety." He called for New Zealand and its allies Australia, the European Union and

the United States, to "better pool our energies and resources to maintain our relative influence" against "external actors and interests."

In other words, the imperialist powers that have ruthlessly exploited the Pacific for more than a century must work together to push back against China and Russia. New Zealand's "Pacific reset" dovetails with Washington's militarisation of the Asia-Pacific region, threats of war against North Korea, and trade war measures, aimed primarily at economically isolating China.

Peters indicated that New Zealand and its allies must prepare for a major war. He stated twice in his speech that "there has never been a time since 1945 when Australia and New Zealand need to work together more closely in the Pacific." During World War II, Pacific islands were turned into bloody battlefields where the US, Australia and New Zealand fought Japan for domination over the region.

New Zealand is an imperialist power. It occupied Samoa from 1914 to 1962 and brutally oppressed the country's inhabitants. Along with Australia and Britain, New Zealand capitalists profited from the looting of phosphates from Nauru and Banaba, in Kiribati. The Cook Islands and Niue are effectively still New Zealand colonies, with limited independence, while Tonga and Samoa depend heavily on NZ and Australian aid.

The NZ First leader declared that New Zealand had a "shared destiny" with the "family" of Pacific countries and "our national security, and our prosperity are inextricably linked." While hypocritically stating that New Zealand recognised Pacific countries' "clear wish to manage their own international relations," Peters complained that "some Pacific leaders are attracted to easy sources of funding," and that "the seductive experience of travelling in some parts of the world ... is mind-bending for some young politicians."

Peters said he and Ardern would “share perspectives” with Pacific leaders “on the strategic environment facing the Pacific, including the proliferation of external actors.”

Tensions surfaced during a March 4 joint press conference with Ardern and Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sa’ilele Malielegaoi. The latter rejected Peters’ suggestion that Chinese activities in the region were not “transparent,” saying: “It’s all out in the open … nothing was hidden.”

Tuilaepa added that over the next five years China had earmarked \$US2 billion for grants and a further \$2 billion in “soft loans” for Pacific countries. He brushed aside questions about Samoa’s total debt to China, saying he did not recall the figure.

During her visit Ardern announced just \$NZ9.5 million in extra aid for Samoa, mostly in the form of grants for businesses.

The visit to Tonga took place amid intense political intrigue, and economic chaos exacerbated by Cyclone Gita. Ardern met Prime Minister ‘Akilisi Pohiva, but not Tonga’s head of state King Tupou VI, who was in China for talks with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. Tonga is a kingdom in which the royal family and nobility wield significant political power and the parliament is only partially elected.

Tonga and other Pacific countries joined a “strategic partnership” with Beijing in 2014 and China has loaned tens of millions of dollars to the country, mainly for infrastructure projects and government buildings. China is expected to play a major role in rebuilding following last month’s cyclone.

On March 1, shortly before Ardern’s visit, Tongan police arrested Lord Tu’ivakano, a noble member of parliament who was prime minister from 2010 to 2014. Tu’ivakano is one of many figures in the Tongan ruling establishment accused of being part of a scheme to sell passports to wealthy Chinese individuals. He also signed the 2014 strategic partnership with China.

On March 4, Internal Affairs Minister ‘Akosita Lavulavu and her husband ‘Etuate were also arrested on corruption charges relating to alleged forgery of documents.

The arrests and their timing raise questions about New Zealand’s involvement. Tonga’s police commissioner Stephen Caldwell, who ordered the arrests, is a New Zealander, whose position is financed by the NZ government’s aid program. The police and justice system is largely funded by New Zealand.

Police Minister Mateni Tapuleluelu, reportedly angered

by the arrests and the amount of power wielded by Caldwell, offered to resign on March 1, but this was rejected by Prime Minister Pohiva.

Far from respecting the independence of the Pacific island nations, the regional imperialist powers are actively preparing to intervene with military force. Since 2012, New Zealand has hosted biennial military exercises called Operation Katipo, involving Australian and US troops, specifically designed to prepare troops to invade a Pacific nation and suppress the local population.

On March 9, New Zealand Defence Minister Ron Mark, a member of NZ First, held talks in Wellington with his Australian counterpart Marise Payne. In a joint statement they declared that “we today face an ever-more contested and competitive world, characterised by rapid change.” The statement emphasised that the two militaries would cooperate closely to maintain “stability” in the Pacific as a “high priority.” Payne also stressed the importance of the two countries’ alliance with the US, including collaboration in the ongoing war in Iraq.

Significantly, the leading role in New Zealand’s Pacific strategy is being played by NZ First, the most overtly anti-immigrant and nationalist party, which the Labour-led government handed a large amount of power. NZ First has called for greater military spending, while seeking to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia. Peters has demanded an inquiry into National Party MP Jian Yang, alleging he is a Chinese Communist Party spy.

Ardern recently ordered an investigation by the intelligence agencies into alleged Chinese “interference.” A similar anti-Chinese witch-hunt, aimed at preparing the population for war, is underway in Australia.



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