

New Zealand government under pressure to expel Russian diplomats

Tom Peters
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Over the past week, the New Zealand Labour-led government has come under sustained attack from the opposition National Party and the media over its refusal to join Britain, the US, Australia and 19 other countries in expelling Russian diplomats.

More than 130 diplomats have been expelled, ostensibly in retaliation for the March 4 poisoning of Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, UK. Without producing any evidence or plausible motive, British Prime Minister Theresa May declared it “highly likely” that the Russian government was responsible, a claim the Kremlin has denied.

Yulia is reportedly recovering in hospital—a development that seriously undermines claims she was the victim of a sophisticated attack using the “military grade” chemical Novichok. Russian officials have been barred from speaking to Yulia.

Just as they lied about “weapons of mass destruction” to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Britain and the US are using the murky Skripal affair to justify their military build-up and preparations for war against nuclear-armed Russia.

Following pressure from Britain’s high commissioner, the New Zealand government announced it would halt efforts to restart trade negotiations with Russia. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Foreign Minister Winston Peters have expressed support for Britain’s belligerent stance against Moscow.

New Zealand, however, is the only member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence sharing network, which has so far refused to expel any Russian diplomats. Ardern told the media on March 27: “While other countries have announced they are expelling undeclared Russian intelligence agents, officials have advised there are no

individuals here in New Zealand who fit this profile.”

This decision immediately provoked a storm of criticism. Until recently, the new Ardern government has been heavily promoted by the media as a means of containing working-class anger over social inequality. Now it is coming under intense pressure to fully line up behind the escalating drive to war with Russia.

In a widely-quoted interview with Radio NZ, security analyst Paul Buchanan, a former US State Department official, said Ardern’s statement was “unbelievably silly” and had “made New Zealand a laughing stock.”

University of Waikato law professor Alexander Gillespie wrote on Newshub’s website that expelling diplomats was “not about uncovering spies” but rather “about making a statement of what is unacceptable behaviour between countries in the 21st century.” He noted that Australia’s government expressed support for any move to send weapons inspectors to Russia.

Such professions of outrage are completely hypocritical. Gillespie and Buchanan supported New Zealand’s participation in the US-led imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have led to at least a million deaths. NZ soldiers in Afghanistan have been accused of war crimes including killing civilians.

In parliament on March 29, Peters echoed British claims that the Skripals were poisoned by a chemical sourced from Russia, but added that culpability was “still a matter of substantial investigation in the UK.”

This prompted an angry response from opposition National Party foreign affairs spokesman Todd McClay, who accused Peters of “dancing around the issue” of Russia’s responsibility. He asked: “Has Mr Peters bought into the Kremlin’s theory that the UK Government might be responsible for attempting to kill the Skripals?” He called on Ardern to “pull Mr Peters into line.”

In fact, Peters did not suggest that Theresa May's government carried out the poisoning. However, given that the incident has provided the pretext for ramping up the anti-Russia campaign, it cannot be ruled out that the British state, or elements within it, were involved.

Peters was also attacked for correctly stating during an interview on March 11 that there is "no evidence" the Russian government had any involvement in shooting down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine in 2014.

Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott told a Sydney radio station: "It's bizarre of the New Zealand foreign minister to make excuses for the Russians." Australia's Labor Party foreign affairs spokesperson Penny Wong also insisted that Russia was responsible. The unsolved murder of 298 passengers and crew has been used by the US and its allies to justify sanctions against Russia and military support for Ukraine.

Peter Jennings from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute think tank wrote in the *Australian* on March 31: "Sadly, New Zealand's failure to join other democracies in expelling Russian spies and Wellington's kowtowing to Beijing shows that this is one old ally that already has given up the fight for Western values."

In fact, the Labour-NZ First-Green Party government supports New Zealand's alliance with Washington and Canberra. Ardern has kept troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and stated last November that she would be prepared to join a war against North Korea.

Labour, the Greens and NZ First agreed with the previous National Party government's decision in 2016 to spend \$20 billion to upgrade the military and integrate New Zealand into the US military build-up against China.

The conflict erupting within the New Zealand political establishment stems from NZ First's push to re-start trade negotiations with Russia in order to lessen the country's reliance on China, currently NZ's second largest trading partner. Talks with Moscow were suspended by the Nationals in 2014 over the shooting down of MH17.

The 2008–2017 National Party government strengthened the alliance with Washington, while also expanding lucrative business ties with China and avoiding direct denunciations of Beijing. This fraught balancing act could not be sustained under conditions

where the US is recklessly pursuing trade war against China.

NZ First, an extreme nationalist and anti-Asian party, formed a coalition with Labour in October 2017 after the US ambassador Scott Brown criticised the National Party's reluctance to endorse Trump's threats to annihilate North Korea. Last September Anne-Marie Brady, an academic from the NATO-funded Wilson Centre in the US, accused the National Party of being in thrall to Chinese interests and National MP Jian Yang of being a Chinese "agent," claims echoed by NZ First.

In line with Washington's demands, Ardern has ordered an investigation by the Security Intelligence Service into so-called Chinese "interference." NZ First and Labour have for years whipped up anti-China sentiment, scapegoating Chinese immigrants for the housing crisis, low wages and other social problems.

The Labour government has been caught off-guard by the intensifying confrontation with Russia. Whatever the present divisions between New Zealand's capitalist parties, there is no anti-imperialist faction of the ruling elite. For more than a century it has relied on its alliance with British, US and Australian imperialism to further New Zealand's own neo-colonial interests in the Pacific. The ruling class has dragged the country into two world wars in the past century and is preparing to do so again.



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