New Zealand foreign minister: “Great Power competition is back”

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New Zealand’s Foreign Minister Winston Peters has reaffirmed the Labour-led coalition government’s intention to strengthen the country’s neo-colonial position in the Pacific while supporting its imperialist “partners” in their drive to militarily confront China.

Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party and Acting Prime Minister, delivered a keynote address to the University of Otago’s annual Foreign Policy School on June 29.

The speech built on one given to the Sydney-based Lowy institute in March, where he announced his government’s “Pacific reset.” The policy is aimed at boosting New Zealand’s presence in the Asia-Pacific’s “contested strategic space,” in alliance with the US, Australia and European powers.

The “reset” has been initiated with a multi-million dollar upgrade in foreign aid to the region. Peters used the Otago conference to announce a new Strategic International Development Fund, earmarked for projects with a life of 50 years and involving “partnerships” with Europe, Japan or Australia. The first is a 300-hectare land reclamation project for housing in the tiny island state of Kiribati to counter the effects of climate change and rising sea water levels.

Peters quoted US President Franklin Roosevelt’s statement that “the Pacific Islands appear as small dots on the map or not at all. But they cover a large strategic area.” Given the “increasing competition for influence and resources,” Peters declared, “this is as true today as it was in the 1940s”—that is, during World War II.

Peters decried “New Zealand’s decreasing influence in the Pacific.” He claimed the Pacific Reset is “not about trying to control Pacific countries economically or politically,” but “working with our Pacific family to be independent and self-sufficient.”

This claim is entirely bogus. The ruling elite’s central aim is to position itself more firmly alongside the major imperialist powers, which have always backed New Zealand’s neo-colonial operations in the Pacific, including its military interventions.

“Great Power competition is back,” Peters declared, “New Zealand needs to strengthen its voice in our region.” “Our mantra,” Peters contended, “is for pursuit of an open, inclusive, and rules-based regional order.” This is code for challenging China’s military, aid and investment activities in the region, invoked by the Obama and Trump administrations on the basis of the post-World War II order in which Washington decides the “rules.”

Peters emphasised that a small country such as New Zealand “cannot do everything in the Pacific alone.” He commended Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who recently toured the North Pacific to assert Canberra’s role in that part of the region closest to China. He also welcomed the United Kingdom’s decision to open three new diplomatic posts in the Pacific.

In a rebuke to Beijing, Peters condemned those “claimants” in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea who have “acted in ways that challenge international law and norms.” “Artificial island building in contested waters, construction, and militarisation risk escalating tensions,” Peters declared. Diplomats from some of New Zealand’s “traditional allies” were reportedly “pleased” with the comments.

Peters added that New Zealand derives its “right to access the region—notably freedom of navigation and overflight” from “international law.” The actions of the US and its allies, however, have nothing to do with defending “freedom of navigation.” The US has exploited tensions in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula as pretexts to step up its military

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presence and war preparations against China.

Last month Mark, a fellow NZ First MP and former soldier, foreshadowed the biggest defence procurement in years with a proposal to purchase four Boeing Poseidon maritime patrol planes from the US, at a cost of $US1.4 billion ($NZ2.03 billion). The planes come equipped with "submarine hunting" technology and offer advanced inter-operability with Australian and US forces.

Peters' speech was one of hypocrisy and obfuscation. He asserted that New Zealand had an "independent foreign policy," citing the 1980s Labour government's anti-nuclear policy, which provoked a rift with the US, as an example of "a small state actor with strong values managing a dispute with an ally over the ultimate existential threat of nuclear weapons." The challenge in 2018, Peters said, was to become "more self-reliant" when "the international order is different, the relationships more complex."

While indicating that New Zealand would not seek to join a projected Indo-Pacific "axis" against China, Peters said such a configuration "makes a lot of sense" for countries such as Australia and India. He added that New Zealand's role in the Pacific would be "consistent with—and indeed complementary to—our partners' policies."

New Zealand does not have, and has never had, an "independent" foreign policy. It is a minor imperialist power whose ruling class has always relied on a strong alliance with a major power to assist in the expansion of NZ's neo-colonial influence in the Pacific. The Labour Party's much-vaunted "anti-nuclear" posture of the 1970s and 1980s was never about "peace-making" but designed to push back against rival powers in the Pacific, including France.

The government is faced with an increasingly fraught dilemma as geo-strategic tensions are ramped up between, on the one hand, China, its second most important trading partner, and, on the other, its traditional military allies, the US and Australia.

Peters only recently returned from a trip to Beijing and announced that there was agreement to have further discussions to strengthen the NZ-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The FTA, signed in 2008, has almost tripled bilateral trade.

The government is meanwhile under pressure over so-called "interference" by Beijing in its affairs. A report published in May by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *China and the Age of Strategic Rivalry*, described New Zealand as a "soft underbelly" through which China and Russia can access the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network. In a Washington hearing of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission in April, former CIA analyst Peter Mattis questioned NZ's ongoing membership of the Five Eyes alliance.

In fact, the government has made clear its alignment with Washington. Last November, Prime Minister Ardern told the media that New Zealand would intervene in North Korea if backed by a United Nations resolution and opposed Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

On July 6, Mark released the government's new Strategic Defence Policy Statement which for the first time explicitly targets China and Russia as the principal "threats" to the "international community." The statement echoes the US Trump administration's 2018 National Defence Strategy demanding stepped-up preparations for looming inter-imperialist conflicts.

In another sign of the strengthening relationship, Peters held a "very positive" phone call with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on June 26. Peters told the media that he was "very encouraged" about his attempts to secure an exemption on US steel tariffs. The pair also discussed the Trump administration's ban on Muslim immigrants, its "border issue" with migrants—which Peters has bluntly refused to criticise—and "our Asia-Pacific relationships."

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