US ambassador praises New Zealand's Pacific "reset"

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The US ambassador to New Zealand, Scott Brown, has warmly praised the NZ Labour-NZ First-Green Party government's support for Washington's intensifying economic, diplomatic and military offensive against China in the Pacific.

During a wide-ranging interview on TV3's "Newshub Nation" last Saturday, Brown described the ramping-up of New Zealand's presence in the Pacific through the government's "reset" policy as "off the charts incredible" and "long overdue." Brown declared that the policy had encouraged Australia and other US allies to "do more" to counter Beijing. He cited Britain's decision to establish three new diplomatic posts in the Pacific as an example.

Brown, a former Republican senator known for supporting waterboarding and other methods of torture, was appointed ambassador last year by President Trump. His comments are an enthusiastic endorsement by the US administration of Labour's strengthening of NZ's neo-colonial position in the Pacific and its support for Washington's drive to war against both China and Russia.

Last October, immediately following the New Zealand election, Brown made an extraordinary intervention designed to impact on the formation of the next government. While protracted negotiations were underway to form a new coalition, Brown used three media interviews to pressure the incoming administration to more openly align with Washington. Brown publicly rebuked the incumbent National Party Prime Minister Bill English, who had not yet conceded office, for failing to fully endorse Trump's stance against North Korea.

Shortly after Brown's intervention, the right-wing, anti-Asian NZ First Party formed a coalition with the Labour Party and the Greens instead of National. The newly-installed Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern quickly made clear that her government would be prepared to join a US-led military offensive against North Korea given UN backing.

Meanwhile Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing, nationalist NZ First, was appointed deputy prime minister and foreign minister. NZ First MP Ron Mark, an ardent militarist and former soldier with service in the Middle East, became defence minister. In July, Mark released a Strategic Defence Policy Statement explicitly targeting China and Russia as the principal "threats" to the "international community."

Peters first announced the Pacific "reset" in a speech at the Australian think tank, the Lowy Institute in March. The Pacific, he warned, was "an increasingly contested strategic space, no longer neglected by Great Power ambition." He called on Australia, the US and European powers to work together with New Zealand to push back against China and Russia.

Highlighting the danger of war, Peters twice stated that "there has never been a time since 1945 when Australia and New Zealand need to work together more closely in the Pacific." Revisiting the theme in a speech at Otago University in July, Peters warned that "increasing competition for influence and resources" in the strategically significant region "is as true today as it was in the 1940s"—that is, during World War II.

To implement the Pacific "reset" the foreign ministry received a massive funding boost in the May budget, to nearly $NZ1 billion. Another $NZ2.3 billion was earmarked for new anti-submarine aircraft to upgrade the NZ military's "inter-operability" with US and allied armed forces.

These measures have been accompanied by an intensifying campaign, led by Labour and NZ First, against alleged Chinese "influence" in domestic

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business and politics. The government is to pass a law this week banning foreigners from buying existing homes in New Zealand, falsely claiming this will address the country's housing crisis and rates of homelessness that are among the highest in the developed world.

Chinese buyers have been singled out for blame over rampant housing shortages, particularly in Auckland. However, Statistics NZ data shows that just over 3 percent of houses that were sold or transferred in the March quarter went to foreigners.

Brown's TV interview signalled that the anti-China measures initiated by Labour have been well-received in Washington. He revealed that talks are currently underway to seek an exemption for New Zealand steel from Trump's recently-imposed tariff regime. "Everything is moving in a positive direction," Brown declared, adding there is "a great effort to make it happen."

Brown underscored Washington's ongoing offensive against China. He repeatedly accused Beijing of failing to abide by the "rules-based order" in the region. This catchphrase has been invoked by the Obama and Trump administrations to demand that other nations abide by the "rules" that Washington sets in the interests of its own economic and strategic aims.

Brown blamed China for the US-initiated trade war, accusing it of manipulating its currency, dumping low-quality steel on the world market, including in NZ, and "stealing our intellectual property." He slammed Beijing's massive One Belt One Road infrastructure project for Eurasia for financially "over-leveraging countries" and "breaking the rules."

Brown went on to praise NZ for acting as a "very valuable leader and partner" in seeking to establish "checks and balances" to counter Beijing.

The same day Brown's interview aired, the Wellington-based *Dominion Post* published an editorial headed "Australia's struggles hurt Pacific," expressing growing nervousness in NZ ruling circles over the turmoil embroiling Australian politics. The seventh prime minister in 11 years was last week installed in Canberra, following a leadership coup within the ruling Liberal Party.

The *Dominion Post* repeated claims, echoed by Brown, that China is "buying influence" through loans and financial partnerships for infrastructure projects in the impoverished Pacific islands. Drawing attention to Peters' call for more support from Canberra, the newspaper claimed that Australian political leaders are becoming distracted by constant instability. "Peters is knocking on Australia's door," it said, but "perhaps for the foreseeable future, no-one is at home."

According to data released this month by the Lowy Institute, China is set to overtake Australia and New Zealand as the largest aid donor to countries in the Pacific. Beijing committed four times more than Canberra in 2017. After contributing to a $3.5 billion road project in Papua New Guinea, a former Australian colony, China's total commitment in the region since 2011 rose to $US5.88 billion, compared to Canberra's $6.72 billion.

Australia and New Zealand are imperialist powers whose ruling elites have brutally exploited much of the region for over a century. They view China's rise as a threat to their dominance.

The Trump administration's enthusiasm for the Labour-NZ First government's close alignment with Washington's war drive against China should be taken as a warning. It further demolishes the lies spread by liberal and pseudo-left commentators that Labour is a "progressive," "reformist" alternative to National. This right-wing government is ramping up military spending and war preparations while whipping up anti-immigrant xenophobia and deepening austerity measures against the working class at home.

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