

Intensifying US pressure on New Zealand government over China

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Following US Vice President Mike Pence's vitriolic attack on China at the recent Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, divisions have erupted into public view within the New Zealand ruling elite over the US-China confrontation.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour-led government has come under pressure to strengthen its commitment to Washington's aggressive drive against Beijing. Citing the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Zealand Herald* reported on November 24 that New Zealand was one of the US allies targeted by the Trump administration to bar the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei.

The push came as telcos around the world prepare to buy new hardware for their 5G networks, the next generation of mobile technology. Earlier this month, Huawei partnered with local telco Spark for a trial mobile 5G rollout. Huawei already has a significant stake in New Zealand as a supplier to Vodafone, Spark and 2Degrees. It also promised to invest \$400 million in telecommunications research.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Washington's pressure "extends the battle lines" of a campaign to keep Huawei out of the US and also block Chinese telecom equipment in countries that host American military bases. New Zealand is a member of the US-led "Five Eyes" intelligence network and hosts a key spy base at Waihopai in the South Island. The Australian government has already banned Huawei and moved to block its further expansion into the Pacific.

Andrew Little, the minister in charge of New Zealand's security services, initially told the *Herald* that the country would "plot its own course." The government would not interfere with "commercial" decisions made by the country's telcos, "subject to compliance with TICSAs [the Telecommunications

Interception Capability and Security Act]."

Almost immediately, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), the country's external spy agency, effectively overrode the minister. It announced on November 28 that it would use its powers under TICSAs to block any use of Huawei equipment in Spark's planned 5G network, citing "significant" security risks.

The Labour-led government, like its National Party predecessor, has tried to maintain a balancing act between the longstanding military alliance with the US on the one hand, and commercial relations with China, a major trading partner, on the other. China accounts for 22.8 percent of the country's exports, primarily dairy products.

Nevertheless, Labour has come under attack from the National Party's opposition leader, Simon Bridges, for "damaging relations" with China over the recent period. Bridges told Radio NZ on November 26 there was a "virtual war" between China and the US, and Ardern had been unable to visit Beijing due to a Chinese diplomatic snub. New Zealand should not be "taking sides," Bridges declared.

Bridges himself has been accused of concealing a \$100,000 donation from Chinese businessman Zhang Yikun in exchange for nominating an ethnic Chinese person for a seat in parliament—a charge he has denied.

Last September, following an inconclusive general election, Ardern's coalition government was installed after an extraordinary public intervention by the US ambassador Scott Brown. He signalled that Washington required the incoming administration to commit more forcefully to the US build-up against China.

Supported by its right-wing nationalist coalition partner, NZ First, the government has duly moved to comply. Its "Pacific Reset" policy has boosted aid and

support in the region to push back against Beijing, and billions are being spent on military hardware to improve “interoperability” with the US.

At this month’s APEC summit, New Zealand joined Australia, the US and Japan in an agreement with the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government to connect power and internet services across most of the country by 2030. The deal is a direct challenge to Beijing’s initiatives in PNG and to its Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure plan, which has gained support from Pacific Island governments.

New Zealand’s corporate media and sections of the political establishment and academia have ramped up a campaign against alleged Chinese political “influence” and “expansionism.” This is a xenophobic propaganda effort to shift New Zealand into even closer alignment with Washington’s military encirclement and trade war against China.

A key figure is Anne-Marie Brady, a Christchurch-based academic, whose research has been funded by the US government-sponsored Wilson Center and the NATO military alliance. For more than a year, Brady has stoked anti-China sentiment while lending it a veneer of academic respectability.

Brady has repeatedly called for the spy agencies to investigate China’s “influence” in politics, business, universities and the media. Without providing any evidence, she has accused two Chinese-born parliamentarians of being Chinese Communist Party members and spies.

Last week, Brady made lurid claims that her car had been “sabotaged” as part of an ongoing campaign to intimidate her, having previously alleged break-ins at her home and campus office. Brady’s claims about her car were based on nothing more than a statement from her mechanic that pressure in the front two tyres had been lowered and the valve caps were missing.

Despite a nine-month police investigation, also involving Interpol, nothing has been presented to substantiate Brady’s allegations of personal intimidation. Nevertheless, she has accused the government of failing to take her case seriously and demanded further investigations by the country’s spy agencies. Brady told the *Guardian* she and her family had requested security assistance from the government but it was not forthcoming.

On November 26, a group of 29 academics and others

issued an open letter calling on Ardern to “make a clear statement in defence of academic freedom in New Zealand in light of the Brady case, and to be very clear that any intimidation and threats aimed at silencing academic voices in this country will not be tolerated.”

Signatories included Amnesty International NZ executive director Tony Blackett, Otago University international relations professor Robert Patman, and author Nicky Hager.

In a Radio NZ interview the following day, Ardern responded cautiously. She could not comment on, or intervene in, an “ongoing investigation.” Nor would she say whether the police National Security Investigation Unit was involved. Ardern expected police were taking the case “seriously,” and she would require a report if any “national security implications” arose.



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