

New Zealand opposition National Party attacked over relations with China

John Braddock
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The long-running campaign against purported Chinese “interference” in New Zealand’s political system intensified in the past week following a five-day visit to Beijing by opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges.

Bridges aired concerns over deteriorating relations between the two countries amid the US-led trade war against China. His visit coincided with attacks on National by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-led government, and sections of the media, for accepting a large donation from a Chinese millionaire in the lead-up to the 2017 election.

Newsroom reported on September 9 that in an interview with Chinese state-owned news channel CGTN, Bridges praised China’s Communist Party for taking the country from mass poverty to economic prosperity, calling it an “amazing story.” Bridges said New Zealand had been a direct beneficiary, “as our trade has grown and we have been able to share that growing prosperity of China.”

Following the signing of a 2008 bilateral Free Trade Agreement, China has become New Zealand’s largest export destination, accounting for nearly \$NZ15.3 billion and 24 percent of total exports. China is also New Zealand’s main source of imports, amounting to \$11.9 billion and nearly 20 percent of the total.

Bridges emphasised that as a “small country” affected by global instability, New Zealand depended on its trade relationship with China. He also criticised the Trump administration, declaring the World Trade Organisation will soon not be able to function because “the US is not allowing new judges to be appointed.”

Bridges solidarised with Beijing over the mass pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, which the interviewer slandered as “illegal and violent.” Bridges responded: “We understand and accept China’s sovereignty in Hong Kong,” adding only that the issue should be resolved “peacefully.”

Bridges’ call for closer ties with China puts National at odds with the Labour-NZ First-Green Party government, pointing to divisions within the ruling elite over how to manage relations with China.

For several years, Labour and NZ First have led an anti-Chinese campaign involving sections of the political establishment, the media, trade unions and academia. The aim is to push back against growing Chinese investment and diplomacy in the wider Pacific, while integrating New Zealand into Washington’s economic, diplomatic and military offensive against Beijing.

Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent NATO-funded academic, who advocates a much closer alliance with the US and a crackdown on China’s “influence” in New Zealand, attacked Bridges’ China visit. She highlighted his meeting with politburo member Guo Shengkun, secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which Brady labelled the “national spy agency.”

The academic also noted that the NZ delegation included Yang Jian, a National MP who Brady accused in 2017, without substantiation, of being an agent of the Chinese Communist Party.

David Capie, director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at Victoria University of Wellington described Bridges’ comments as “extraordinary.” “Alarming to have such a big gap between govt & opposition views/language concerning such a critical relationship,” Capie tweeted. The Centre promotes stronger military ties with the US and NATO.

With a growing number of economists forecasting an imminent recession, the ruling elite is facing an increasingly sharp dilemma. As the US escalates its trade war and threats of nuclear war against China, New Zealand’s attempts to balance this against its economic reliance on China has become increasingly untenable.

The government, with the right-wing, anti-Asian New

Zealand First Party playing a key role, has reinforced New Zealand's presence in the Pacific and called on Washington to further militarise the region to push back against China. New Zealand's ruling elite relies on US support for its own neo-colonial domination over Pacific island countries.

Bridges responded to his critics by declaring that China is "a superpower that we trade more with than any other country in the world," and the relationship had protected New Zealand from experiencing the 2008 financial crisis "as hard as we could."

Prior to his departure to Beijing, Bridges was attacked over electoral donations to National. On August 27, the *New Zealand Herald* reported an allegation that former trade minister Todd McClay "helped arrange" a \$NZ150,000 donation from Chinese racing industry billionaire Lang Lin prior to the last election. Under electoral law, overseas donations are capped at \$1,500, but Lang's donation was allowed because it was made through a NZ-registered company.

The Lang allegation was made by Jami-Lee Ross, a former National MP who was ousted from the National Party last year after he accused Bridges of improperly covering up a \$100,000 donation from Auckland businessman Zhang Yikun.

Bridges said Lang's donation was entirely legal and the party's hands were clean. However, Ardern declared it "outside the spirit" of the law against foreign interference in elections. Green MP Golriz Ghahraman called the payment "deeply alarming," and said it was an example of "powerful vested interests tipping big money into the coffers of the National Party."

The show of outrage from Labour and the Greens has nothing to do with opposition to "big money," which all the capitalist parties assiduously court and depend on, receiving tens of thousands of dollars from wealthy individuals, businesses and trade unions. Rather, the furore is part of the escalating vilification of China.

The country's spy agencies last month warned a parliamentary committee currently considering foreign interference laws of "troubling" foreign donations and "relationship-building" across the political spectrum by "state actors and their proxies." Security Intelligence Service director-general Rebecca Kitteridge flatly refused to divulge any specifics to the hearing, saying the subject was "extremely sensitive."

Voicing the views of the trade unions and pseudo-left outfits, the *Daily Blog*, one of the most noxious purveyors of xenophobia, described Bridges' statements as evidence

of "National's unique subservience to China." The blog denounced Lang's donation as "dangerous" and asked, "is the National Party just a front for Chinese interests?"

Following a statement by the Chinese embassy opposing protests at Auckland University in sympathy with the Hong Kong demonstrations, the *Daily Blog* demonised Chinese immigrants. It said on August 12: "Our Chinese Economic Overlords are unhappy and starting to interfere in NZ domestic politics by fermenting [sic] trouble using their nationals in the country... China will use their diaspora throughout the South Pacific to shut down criticism."

The media pundits, academics and political leaders are silent over Washington's blatant interference in the country's affairs. During the month-long coalition negotiations following the 2017 election, US ambassador Scott Brown, a Trump appointee, publicly called for a government that would integrate more closely with Washington's anti-Chinese campaign. This aim was achieved by NZ First's decision to form a coalition with Labour rather than National, which Brown criticised for being too hesitant to support Trump's threats against North Korea.

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