

Australian PM calls on New Zealand to “align more” against China

Tom Peters
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On Sky News on February 1, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called on New Zealand’s Labour Party-led government to “stick together” with the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, which includes Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Canada, against China.

Interviewer Paul Murray asked whether Morrison was concerned that New Zealand was “changing its priorities a little bit, or [is] China helping them change their priorities?... How important is it that New Zealand is all in on Five Eyes [and] not trying to keep an eye somewhere else as well?”

Morrison replied: “The Five Eyes is really important, and so are liberal market democracies... all of these countries need to align more... on security issues and intelligence” in opposition to “authoritarian” countries. He added: “We’ve got to continue to maintain our vigilance over this, and to do that we’ve got to stick together.”

These statements come amid explosive geo-political tensions stoked by Washington’s increasingly direct talk of war. Admiral Charles Richard, head of the US Strategic Command, which oversees nuclear weapons, recently wrote that “a regional crisis with Russia or China could escalate quickly to a conflict involving nuclear weapons.” He called for the US military to “shift its principal assumption from ‘nuclear employment is not possible’ to ‘nuclear employment is a very real possibility.’”

Under successive administrations, beginning with President Barack Obama, followed by Donald Trump and now Joe Biden, Washington has greatly expanded its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The US and its allies, including Australia and New Zealand, have carried out provocative military exercises aimed at preparing for an attack on China, which the US ruling class views as its main economic rival and chief obstacle to its post-World War II global dominance.

The world economic crisis, exacerbated by the

COVID-19 pandemic, has prompted all imperialist powers to further increase their military spending, while promoting nationalism to divert class tensions onto an external enemy.

Australia and New Zealand are minor imperialist powers closely allied with the United States. Successive Labor and Liberal-National Party governments in Canberra have placed the country on the front line of US preparations for war against China. Australia’s intelligence agencies are engaged in a witch-hunt against politicians, business figures and academics with links to China. The Morrison government has joined the US-led trade war by vetoing numerous Chinese investment agreements on “national security” grounds. In an apparent response, Beijing last year imposed restrictions on some Australian exports.

New Zealand has likewise strengthened military ties with the US and adopted a more explicit anti-Chinese stance since Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-led coalition took office in October 2017. Following an inconclusive election result, then-US ambassador Scott Brown made clear that the Trump administration saw the previous National Party government as too close to China. After Brown’s public intervention, the right-wing nationalist and anti-Chinese NZ First Party decided to form a coalition with Labour and the Greens instead of National.

The Ardern government, with NZ First playing a major role in foreign and military policy, produced a defence strategy in 2018 that referred to China and Russia as the main “threats” to the international order, echoing the Pentagon. The government is committed to spending billions on upgrading the military and boosting its presence in the Pacific, to shore up New Zealand’s neo-colonial interests in the region, backed by the US.

Morrison’s comments, however, reflect concerns in Australia’s ruling elite—and no doubt in Washington as

well—that New Zealand’s political leaders have not gone far enough in putting the country on a war footing and are strengthening trade ties with China.

In the October 2020 election, Labour gained an absolute majority, while NZ First failed to retain any seats in parliament—removing the vocal anti-Chinese Foreign Minister Winston Peters and Defence Minister Ron Mark.

While Australia’s relations with China have deteriorated, New Zealand last month upgraded its “free trade” agreement (FTA) with China, which remains NZ’s biggest trading partner with annual two-way trade worth \$NZ32 billion. The agreement will remove or reduce tariffs and compliance costs on most forestry, dairy and other exports from NZ, while providing benefits for its education, aviation and finance industries.

Morrison’s remarks to Sky News were triggered by comments by NZ Trade Minister Damien O’Connor after the FTA was signed. Asked by CNBC whether New Zealand could mediate the worsening relations between Australia and China, O’Connor replied: “I can’t speak for Australia and the way it runs its diplomatic relationships, but clearly if they were to follow us and show respect, I guess a little more diplomacy from time to time and be cautious with wording, then they too, hopefully, could be in a similar situation.”

There was an immediate backlash in Australia. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote: “Senior Australian government officials are infuriated at Mr O’Connor’s comments, which they see as a continuing pattern of New Zealand not joining other allies in standing up to China’s growing assertiveness.” *The Australian* accused New Zealand of “opportunism” and said “the Chinese Foreign Ministry was quick to praise Comrade O’Connor, a spokesperson saying Australia should ‘heed the constructive voices from people with vision.’”

The episode underscores tensions and divisions over foreign policy within New Zealand’s political and media establishment. Some pro-business commentators defended O’Connor. The *New Zealand Herald’s* Heather du Plessis-Allan said he was “correct in what he said. His error was in saying it out loud... Given our size and dependence on China’s trade, we can’t afford the sanctions Australia is copping.”

Ardern sought to distance herself from O’Connor’s statements, without directly contradicting him. She told the media on Wednesday: “I don’t necessarily take that same position in the way he’s presented it... In the same way we wouldn’t expect Australia to give too much commentary on our relationship [with China], we

shouldn’t be giving commentary on theirs.”

Others demanded a firmer alignment with Australia and the US. National Party MP Simon O’Connor, a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, which includes politicians from the US, Australia and other allied countries, denounced the trade minister’s statements as “a slap in the face.” He told *Stuff*: “It suits the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] to have a trade deal with New Zealand right now in order to increase pressure on Australia. For Damien to so loudly trumpet in the Australians’ faces suits the political end of the CCP.”

Academic Anne-Marie Brady, whose anti-Chinese “research” has been funded by NATO and promoted in the media, tweeted: “NZ’s China policy isn’t pretty to watch.” She called on the US, European Union and UK to “drop trade barriers to help us diversify” and decrease NZ’s reliance on China.

The trade union-backed *Daily Blog*, which supports the government, is the most prolific purveyor of anti-China propaganda. On February 1 its editor Martyn Bradbury demanded “a united front with Australia” against China, which he accused of “preparing for war in the South China Sea.” The article did not mention the US military build-up in the region and preparations for nuclear war.

Three days later, Bradbury repeated discredited claims by Trump and the US intelligence agencies that the coronavirus had leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. He wrote: “China have aggressively upped their rhetoric for war... to distract a planet away from their culpability in a global pandemic.”

As these comments make clear, there is no faction of the political establishment that opposes the drive toward war, including the Labour Party, the unions and their “left” supporters. In a speech on February 4, Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta underscored the importance of the alliance with the US, calling it “an integral defence and security partner and our third largest individual trading relationship” that “will continue to strengthen.”



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