

New Zealand accused of “backstabbing” allies over China

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New Zealand’s Labour-Green coalition government is under increasing pressure, from sections of the NZ ruling elite and from the country’s allies, over its apparent reluctance to fully endorse the escalating build-up to war against China.

As the Biden administration ramps up Washington’s diplomatic and military offensive, every country is being forced into line. The furore over the Jacinda Ardern-led government’s less than full-throated support for the confrontation with Beijing highlights the extraordinary tensions now developing.

Matters came to a new head last month after several governments, led by the US and Britain, denounced what they claimed was Beijing’s “meddling” in the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The WHO report conclusively debunked the lie that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan. It refuted US efforts to promote the theory that COVID-19 was developed as a biological weapon. The WHO considered the possibility of a laboratory leak, but dismissed it as “extremely unlikely.” COVID-19 most likely originated, it concluded, in a population of bats or other animals before travelling through a series of intermediaries to infect humans.

The scientific evidence has not stopped the bogus campaign led by Washington, seeking to shift blame for the pandemic from their own catastrophic policies, which have caused millions of deaths, onto China. At the same time, the US is seeking to justify its reckless military encirclement and threats against China, which is viewed as the major obstacle to American hegemony.

New Zealand was the only member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance, which includes Australia, Canada and the UK, that did not sign the communiqué criticising the WHO report. “As this is a scientific report, we want to make sure we understand the science before

making any comment,” a spokeswoman for NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta told the *Australian*.

NZ’s failure to immediately join the attack on the WHO prompted an angry response in Australia. Sky News commentator Andrew Bolt condemned Ardern for “pandering” to China’s “tyranny” and “backstabbing” NZ’s allies. He said Ardern was “ratting out on Australia.” New Zealand was acting as a “useful idiot” to “split opposition to the growing menace that is China,” which Bolt accused of preparing for war.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* declared that while Australia’s relationship with China had imploded during the pandemic, New Zealand “has become Beijing’s favourite member of the Five Eyes group.” Wellington was “rewarded,” the article claimed, with an upgrade to its free trade agreement with China. In January, New Zealand had refused to sign a statement from the Five Eyes condemning the arrests of pro-democratic politicians in Hong Kong.

New Zealand academic Anne-Marie Brady, whose research has been funded by NATO and the Washington-based Wilson Center, tweeted on March 31: “At what point does NZ’s quiet shift on China, look more like timidity, even appeasement?” She told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the Ardern government wanted to join “like-minded coalitions” against China but was concerned about endangering economic ties with China.

Since 2017 the Labour-led government has in fact strengthened NZ’s military ties with the US and adopted a more explicit anti-Chinese stance. Ardern took office after then-US ambassador Scott Brown made clear that the Trump administration saw the previous National Party government as too close to China.

The right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, which spouts anti-Chinese xenophobia, was part of Labour’s coalition between 2017 and 2020 and playing a major role in

foreign policy. The first Ardern government identified China and Russia as the main “threats” to the international order, echoing the Pentagon. The current Labour-Green administration remains 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.

However, the increasingly frantic US-led drive to war requires the ramping up of misinformation, propaganda and outright lies.

The barrage over New Zealand’s purported backsliding reflects concerns in Washington and Canberra that Wellington has not gone far enough in putting the country on a war footing and is instead strengthening trade ties with China. New Zealand exports \$NZ18 billion of products to China annually, double what it sends to Australia.

While sections of the NZ business elite are anxious that trading relations with China are not jeopardised, there is a growing clamour in the media for a more aggressive posture toward Beijing. A new offensive has been launched centring on concocted claims of “genocide” against China’s Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province.

New Zealand joined Australia last month in expressing “grave concerns” about reports of “severe human rights abuses” against the Uyghurs. The joint statement repeated Washington’s unsubstantiated allegations that Uyghurs are subjected to mass surveillance, extra-judicial detentions, forced labour and birth control, including sterilisation. Canberra and Wellington welcomed coordinated sanctions against China by Canada, the European Union, the UK and US.

The main opposition National Party, previously denounced by Labour and its supporters as being too close to Chinese business interests, has also taken a tougher stance. The party’s foreign affairs spokesman Gerry Brownlee said last month that the government should change the law to allow it to unilaterally impose sanctions over the Uyghur issue. Currently the government can only implement sanctions within the framework of the United Nations.

Dovetailing with Washington’s opposition to China’s push into high-tech industries, the NZ government previously banned the telecommunications giant Huawei from infrastructure developments. Recently, two New Zealand tech companies—Rocos Global and Icehouse Ventures—which had financial connections with iFlytek, a company blacklisted by the US in 2019, have been forced

to shut down their China connections following a campaign waged by the *Stuff* website.

Stuff, whose editor Anna Fifield is a former bureau chief for the Bezos-owned *Washington Post* in Beijing, recently produced a 40-minute video repeating the lurid accusations of “genocide” by Chinese authorities as the basis for a series of highly tendentious articles on the Uyghurs.

Such “reporting” is not motivated by genuine concern over the repressive actions of China’s police state which are directed, above all, against the entire working class. The corporate media is building a “human rights” case for imperialist aggression, as was done to justify the criminal US wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, in which New Zealand participated.

Pseudo-left organisations are playing their usual putrid role. The NZ-based International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which supports the Ardern government, posted an article on its website on March 18 entitled “A Short History of Uyghur Resistance” by one Louis Proyect. The article, originally from *Counterpunch*, backs Uyghur separatism, denies that this has anything to do with US imperialist machinations, and describes China as “the 21st century’s emerging number one imperialist power.” Not for the first time, the ISO is providing a rationale for military intervention by US imperialism.

The growing anti-Asian propaganda within New Zealand and racist violence in the US provoked a protest of 1,000 people in Auckland on March 27. The “Stop Asian Hate” rally gathered in Aotea Square before marching along Queen Street. The protest, however, was tightly controlled, with the main speaker, Labour MP Naisi Chen, avoiding any mention of the obvious connection between racism and the drive toward war against China.



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