

New Zealand facing demands for sharper anti-China line

Tom Peters
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Over the past week, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government has faced further attacks from the Australian and British media, and sections of the NZ media and political establishment, for its perceived failure to fully align with the US-led preparations for war against China.

New Zealand is a close ally of the US and a member of the top-level Five Eyes intelligence sharing network that includes the US, UK, Australia and Canada. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government, since it first came into office in 2017, has supported Washington's militarisation in the Indo-Pacific region, which is aimed at encircling China and maintaining US dominance through war if necessary.

The 2018 NZ defence strategy echoed the Trump administration's identification of Russia and China as the major "threats" to the international order. The Ardern government is spending billions of dollars to upgrade NZ's military and expand its own presence in the Pacific.

As President Biden's administration ramps up the drive to war, however, it is demanding absolute, unwavering support from every US ally, which is disrupting internal politics and diplomatic relations throughout the world. Senior US military commanders have predicted a war against China over Taiwan within six years or less and warned that it is likely to involve nuclear weapons.

New Zealand's political establishment is increasingly nervous about the implications of these developments for its relations with China, which takes about 28 percent of NZ's exports and is the country's most important trading partner.

Wellington has baulked at joining some of the inflammatory denunciations of China. The Australian media recently attacked NZ for failing to join the other Five Eyes countries in a statement alleging that Beijing "meddled" in a World Health Organisation report on the origins of the coronavirus—part of the campaign of lies and distortions to divert blame for millions of deaths

caused by the failure of Washington and its allies to suppress the pandemic.

The latest storm of criticism erupted after a speech on April 19 by Foreign Minister Mahuta, delivered to the government-funded New Zealand China Council. Mahuta said NZ's relationship with China was "in good shape" and praised the upgrade of a free trade deal in January, saying it would "deliver new benefits for New Zealand businesses."

The speech also clearly supported Washington's anti-China push. "There are some things on which New Zealand and China do not, cannot, and will not, agree," Mahuta declared, referring to Beijing's actions in Hong Kong and its "treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang."

The Ardern government has joined the US in hypocritically denouncing China's human rights abuses. Last month, Wellington and Canberra expressed support for coordinated sanctions against China by Canada, the European Union, the UK and US, based on unsubstantiated claims of "genocide" against the Uyghur minority.

Mahuta called for New Zealand to diversify its trade so as to be less reliant on China. She also praised NZ's Pacific Reset strategy, aimed at protecting its neo-colonial dominance over island nations in the Pacific region, in alliance with the US and Australia, and pushing back against China's growing economic influence. Mahuta criticised China's large loans to several Pacific countries, saying "economic vulnerability and indebtedness is a major risk for the future of the Pacific."

Despite her clear pro-US stance, however, Mahuta has been attacked for stating that New Zealand was "uncomfortable with expanding the remit" of the Five Eyes. "We would much rather prefer to look for multilateral opportunities to express our interests on a number of issues," she said.

New Zealand, despite its small size, plays an integral

role in the Five Eyes. A 2013 document leaked from the US National Security Agency by Edward Snowden revealed that NZ's Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) was "especially helpful in its ability to provide NSA ready access to areas and countries... difficult for the US to access," including China. The GCSB has also gathered intelligence to assist with the US-led war in Afghanistan.

The US, however, is increasingly pushing to transform the Five Eyes into a more open military-intelligence and diplomatic alliance against China. Mahuta's speech came at the same time that Japan's right-wing nationalist government, which is deeply integrated into the US military planning against China, is seeking to join the Five Eyes. Tokyo's ambassador to Australia told the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) this week that he was "optimistic" this would happen soon.

The newspaper stated that Japan and the Five Eyes countries all "see China as a strategic rival," but that "Canberra and Washington are concerned by Wellington's attempt to curtail its expansion." It said Australian officials had been "blindsided" by Mahuta's statements, which were interpreted as "New Zealand's official opposition to using the spy network to exert diplomatic pressure on Beijing."

An editorial in the *Australian* newspaper entitled "Crucial Five Eyes alliance must not become 4½ Eyes," accused the Ardern government of a "blatant attempt to curry favour with China." It declared that "as China asserts its influence in the South China Sea and across the Pacific, strong alliances, such as the Five Eyes intelligence network, have never been more important."

The UK *Times*, in an article headlined "Five Eyes on China cut to four as New Zealand puts trade first," accused Wellington of breaking an agreement reached last year. In June 2020, defence ministers from all the Five Eyes countries said they would "further strengthen their relationship" and "advance defence and security cooperation... [to] defend a stable, rules-based global order that is increasingly being challenged."

The British *Telegraph*'s "defence editor" Con Coughlin wrote that New Zealand "faces the very real prospect of expulsion from the alliance" for "cosying up to China's communist rulers."

The government is also facing criticism within New Zealand, reflecting deepening divisions within the ruling elite over how to align. Brooke van Velden, foreign affairs spokesperson for the far-right ACT Party, said the government was "pandering" to Beijing, and Mahuta's

speech "reflects the worrying distance we are developing from our Five Eyes partners."

Alexander Gillespie, a prominent pro-US academic at Waikato University, wrote in a widely-syndicated column that New Zealand had to do "more than lip service" such as making "noises about democracy in Hong Kong." He called on NZ to join the next military exercise by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad—a quasi-alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia against China.

Highlighting the importance of the alliance, this week Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne visited New Zealand ahead of Anzac Day, the April 25 holiday that commemorates both countries' involvement in World War I and other imperialist wars, including the criminal US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The SMH revealed that Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison will also visit for talks with Ardern in two weeks, and "the future of the Five Eyes will be a hot topic of discussion."

In a joint media conference with Payne on Thursday, Mahuta sought to downplay any differences with Australia, stating: "We receive significant benefits from being a part of [the Five Eyes] and they are close allies and friends in terms of common values and principles."

Prime Minister Ardern similarly told the media, "some of the reporting I've seen is actually just inaccurate... Five Eyes remains our most important security and intelligence partnership and that has not changed."

These comments underscore the fact that, whatever tactical differences and tensions exist, driven by concerns over NZ's trade with China, the Ardern government remains committed to the alliance with the US, as Washington moves ever closer to all-out war against China.



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