

Australia, New Zealand prime ministers “in lockstep” over China

John Braddock**7 June 2021**

A statement issued by the prime ministers of New Zealand and Australia at the end of their bilateral talks in Queenstown, New Zealand on May 31 drew a sharp response from the Chinese government.

The trans-Tasman leaders emphasised their “unity” in response to Beijing’s alleged increasing regional influence. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he and New Zealand’s Labour Party leader Jacinda Ardern were “in lockstep” in seeking a “free and open Indo-Pacific, a peaceful Indo-Pacific,” echoing US statements against China over the contested region.

Responding to media questions over recent strain between the two countries regarding China, Morrison declared that “there are those far from here that would seek to divide us.” While not naming China directly, he elaborated: “I have no doubt there will be those who seek to undermine Australia and New Zealand’s security by trying to create points of difference that are not there.”

The summit took place amid explosive geo-political tensions stoked by Washington’s increasingly bellicose talk of war. In April it was revealed that the Australian government and military are working intensely to ramp up preparations to join the US in a war against China over control of Taiwan.

Meanwhile, a furious campaign led by the Australian media has accused New Zealand of being “soft” on Beijing and renegeing on its responsibilities to the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, which includes Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Canada.

Reflecting concerns, no doubt shared by Washington, that New Zealand’s political establishment is failing to put the country on a war footing and instead strengthening trade ties with China, Morrison in February called on Ardern to “stick together” with the Five Eyes. Ardern came under more pressure in April

after Wellington baulked at supporting inflammatory US-led allegations that Beijing “meddled” in a World Health Organisation report on the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

Morrison rejected accusations that New Zealand has sold its “sovereignty” to China to maintain its vital trading relationship. “Australia and New Zealand are trading nations, but neither of us would ever trade our sovereignty or our values,” he declared.

Morrison invoked the two countries’ military alliance—forged in their joint participation in imperialist wars since World War I—to foreshadow looming military confrontations. The two nations had carved out “a uniquely Anzac path through COVID-19,” he declared and “must also continue to pursue an Anzac path through the other issues” (The Anzacs were the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in World War I).

The final communiqué stressed unwavering solidarity with the Biden administration’s aggressive positioning against China. It expressed “serious concern” over developments in the South China Sea, including the continued “militarisation” of disputed islands and “destabilising activities” at sea. The statement underscored “the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight,” giving the US and its allies the go-ahead for stepped-up military provocations.

The statement further voiced concern over developments that “limit the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong.” It singled out the “human rights” situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and called upon China to “respect the human rights of the Uyghur people and other Muslim minorities and to grant the United Nations and other independent observers meaningful and unfettered access to the region.”

The Chinese government lashed out at the criticisms, calling them “irresponsible.” China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, Wang Wenbin, said the statement made “groundless accusations” and “grossly interfered in China’s internal affairs and seriously violated the international law and basic norms governing international relations.”

In response, Ardern denied making “irresponsible” comments, saying the statements had “really just been a reiteration of New Zealand’s position.” She said New Zealand and Australia had “broadly been positioned in exactly the same place” on major human rights and trade policy. “At no point in our discussions today did I detect any difference in our relative positions on the importance of maintaining a very strong and principled perspective,” she declared.

New Zealand has previously joined Australia on a number of key statements regarding Hong Kong and Xinjiang and recently backed Australia’s action in the World Trade Organisation after China imposed damaging tariffs on Australian barley.

In a significant and highly anti-democratic development, it has recently been revealed that New Zealand Labour and the opposition National Party last year secretly orchestrated the resignations of two Chinese-born MPs from parliament due to unspecified “security concerns.”

Labour MP Raymond Huo and National MP Jian Yang announced their retirements within days of one another in July, months before the October election. Their unexplained exits were organised following intervention by the intelligence agencies and after a vicious public campaign by pro-Washington academic Anne-Marie Brady.

There is growing nervousness in the New Zealand ruling elite over international pressures to fall into line against China. In a speech in April, Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta called for the country to diversify its trade relations in order to be less reliant on China. In response, Beijing urged New Zealand to work in “the same direction, make the pie of cooperation bigger, rise above external distractions.”

Australia and New Zealand are highly dependent on China for trade. China accounts for around 30 percent of New Zealand’s exports, and \$NZ33 billion (\$US23.8 billion) of total trade. China is Australia’s largest export market, but over the past year an

escalating trade war has hit the total value of Australia’s export sector by around \$A47.7 billion (\$US36.9 billion).

New Zealand is involved in an unsustainable balancing act. Media commentary following the leaders’ meeting described it, according to *New Zealand Herald* commentator Bryce Edwards, as a “highly contrived united front” designed to obscure ongoing and serious differences. The *Herald* opined: “Like the actors from the wildly popular TV show [“Friends”], we are bound to be friends for life. But... the friendship appears as strained as it has ever been.”

Newshub political editor Tova O’Brien portrayed the event as a deliberate move to prevent greater trans-Tasman conflict from breaking out, but one in which Australia managed to emerge “on top.” *Politico* blogger Richard Harman declared that “New Zealand is now inching closer to Australia’s position on China. We are not there yet, but it would seem we are on our way.” He warned, however: “New Zealand may be family to Australia—as Morrison continually says—but its best mate is the United States.”

The Biden administration is escalating the hostilities begun under Trump to isolate and confront China across the entire Pacific. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently warned Pacific leaders against “threats to the rules-based international order” and “economic coercion.” Blinken was speaking to leaders from 11 countries including Fiji, the Solomon Islands, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, French Polynesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands, as part of the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders, held in Hawaii.

In reality, US imperialism established the so-called post-World War II order, in which it sets the rules, and is prepared to use all means, including war, to prevent China from challenging its global hegemony. No country in the region is exempt from the gathering drive to war.



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