

New Zealand PM aligns with Washington over Indo-Pacific

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern used several key opportunities this month to firmly align the Labour-Green Party government with US imperialism’s escalating economic, diplomatic and military confrontation with China.

Speaking to an audience of diplomats and government officials at the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs conference, “Standing in the Future: New Zealand and the Indo-Pacific Region,” held in Wellington on July 14, Ardern for the first time embraced the phrase “Indo-Pacific” to describe NZ’s foreign policy positioning.

The use of the term by Washington and the Pentagon, rather than the Asia Pacific, signified a significant shift to an integrated strategy towards the Indian and Pacific Oceans aimed at encircling China. The Indo-Pacific Command based in Hawaii took over responsibility for planning and operations in the Indian Ocean and the US has markedly boosted military ties with India.

Ardern announced that New Zealand, along with other countries, is now adopting the Indo-Pacific “outlook” in reaction to “more challenging geopolitics.” Her government has faced increasingly strident demands from Washington and Canberra to fall into line with the US-led build-up to war, regardless of the impact on economic relations with China.

Led by US President Biden, the so-called “Quad”—the quasi-military alliance of the US, Japan, Australia and India—is ratcheting up the confrontation with China throughout the Indo-Pacific. Australia and Japan are formal US allies, while India is in a strategic partnership with Washington involving basing arrangements and arms sales.

Other imperialist powers, including Britain, France and Germany, are also intervening to stoke preparations for war. In April, the British government dispatched a Carrier Strike Group to the region in its largest military deployment since the Falklands War. The NATO-backed

operation involved a provocative sail-through in the South China Sea.

Ardern cloaked her remarks in hypocritical concerns about climate change and COVID-19. “The Indo-Pacific is to some degree at an inflection point ... The forms of cooperation needed to overcome COVID-19 require countries to let go of narrow nationalistic approaches,” she intoned. Ardern cynically declared that the term “Indo-Pacific” was often used to “exclude some nations from dialogue”—meaning China—but New Zealand would not use the phrase as a “subtext for exclusion.”

However, Ardern said New Zealand wanted a world where there was respect for “rules,” consistency in international law, open trade and investment, and transparency in foreign policy objectives and “initiatives beyond borders.” This echoes Washington’s demands that China abides by the “international rules-based order,” in which the US sets the rules.

Again lining up with the US, Ardern expressed “concerns” over the South China Sea, “including artificial island building, continued militarisation, and activities which pose risks to freedom of navigation and overflight.” Success in combatting these, she said, would depend on “working with the widest possible set of partners,” that is, the US and its allies.

The US has repeatedly conducted provocative “Freedom of Navigation Operations” challenging Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and encouraged other countries to do the same.

Ardern used the Wellington conference to praise the Biden administration, declaring: “New Zealand’s relationship with the United States has deep roots, built over many decades of cooperation. We share values and have common interests in how the region operates.”

Biden’s National Security Council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, Kurt Campbell, live-streamed into the conference, explicitly attacking China, whose diplomacy

and economic activities, he claimed, “go against global norms and values.”

Campbell declared that the US is determined to maintain “peace and stability”—i.e., its own unchallenged hegemony—“through deterrence, through necessary military actions and through engagements with partners who share our interests.”

Clearly impressed with Ardern’s performance, Biden subsequently made a personal phone call. Ardern told the media the two leaders discussed the “stability of the Indo-Pacific region,” trade and investment, and the domestic and Pacific vaccine roll-outs. She again stressed that NZ and the US shared “common values and interests... including a commitment to an open and rules-based Indo-Pacific.”

The issue surfaced again during a special online meeting of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) leaders on July 17, convened by Ardern as the organisation’s current host. The stated aim was to discuss a “collaborative approach” to tackling the COVID pandemic, but, according to *New Zealand Herald* correspondent Fran O’Sullivan, “geopolitical tensions did still colour the event.”

While Biden attended, Chinese President Xi Jinping sidestepped it, his officials playing a video address instead. Both Xi and Biden emphasised their respective countries’ contribution to regional vaccine rollouts, with China announcing a \$US3 billion fund.

However, as O’Sullivan wrote, “Biden went way beyond the APEC script, using the event to reiterate his commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” saying he hoped the region would adopt a “values-based” and “transparent” vision.

The government’s solidifying pro-Washington stance takes place against an increasingly bellicose anti-China propaganda campaign in the political and media establishment designed to stir up popular sentiment for war preparations.

New Zealand joined its Five Eyes allies—the US, Australia, UK and Canada—last week in condemning alleged Chinese state involvement in hacking. A particularly blunt official statement, headlined “New Zealand condemns malicious cyber activity by Chinese state-sponsored actors,” was described by a Radio NZ commentator as a signal to both China and NZ’s allies that “New Zealand can talk tough on China when it wants to.”

The Chinese embassy in Wellington dismissed the statement as a “malicious smear,” and urged the NZ

government to “abandon the Cold War mentality.” The Chinese ambassador took the unusual step of summoning NZ foreign affairs officials to a meeting to protest the accusations.

NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta released a statement declaring that areas of difference “need not define our relationship,” but New Zealand would “continue to promote the things that we believe in, and support the international rules-based system.”

Earlier in the month Labour MP Louisa Wall gained significant media attention after she told reporters on July 6 that she believed “genocide is happening” against the Uyghur population of Xinjiang. This blatant and inflammatory lie is being used by Washington as a potential “humanitarian” pretext for war.

Wall is part of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), a network of 200 politicians from 20 parliaments. It includes members of the Australian Liberal and Labor parties, politicians from the UK, Canada, Germany and other European countries, and leading US anti-China hawks—Republican Marco Rubio and Democrat Rob Menendez. IPAC’s website says it aims to “foster deeper collaboration between like-minded legislators” to develop “security strategies” to counter China.

Divisions persist within New Zealand’s ruling elite, with some business leaders clearly disturbed by the rapidly deteriorating relations. Export New Zealand executive director Catherine Beard said the trade repercussions of the government’s stance were a big concern but she hoped the two countries could “keep politics and trade separate.”

New Zealand China Council chair Don McKinnon, a former National Party deputy prime minister, warned: “Once you reach a stage where you feel you have to criticise China publicly... you’ve got to be prepared for the consequences of that... Trade with China means money in people’s pockets in New Zealand from one end of the country to the other.” China took more than \$19 billion of New Zealand exports in the 12 months to June last year.



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