

New Zealand PM “pleased to see” AUKUS military pact

Tom Peters
21 September 2021

The Labour Party-Greens coalition government in New Zealand has cautiously welcomed the AUKUS military pact announced on September 16 by US President Joe Biden and the prime ministers of Australia and the UK.

The deal includes provisions to help Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, and for a greater US military presence in Australia. It represents a major step towards what would be a catastrophic US-led war against China, which would drag in every other country.

The transformation of Australia into a giant base for US military operations makes it a target for retaliation from China, with implications for the wider region. New Zealand, as an ally of Australia and a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, would be immediately involved in any conflict.

The US ruling elite views China as the main obstacle to its global hegemony. Under presidents Obama, Trump and now Biden, the US military presence in the Indo-Pacific region has vastly expanded and Washington has imposed trade war measures and economic sanctions against China.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was reportedly only informed about the AUKUS the day before it was announced. New Zealand and Canada were not included in the months of discussions on the pact, despite both countries being part of the Five Eyes along with the US, Australia and UK.

Ardern told the media she was “pleased to see” the US and UK showing a greater interest in “our region... because of course this is a contested region.” She said she would not have expected to be included in AUKUS because “the anchor of this arrangement [is] nuclear-powered submarines... [which] couldn’t come into our waters.”

In 1984, David Lange’s Labour Party government banned nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed vessels from visiting New Zealand. The anti-nuclear policy was a

means for the Lange government to posture as anti-war and divert attention from its right-wing onslaught against working class living standards. It caused a public rift with the US, but behind the scenes Lange significantly ramped up New Zealand’s involvement in the Five Eyes, building the Waihopai spy base to appease Washington.

Since World War II, New Zealand’s ruling class has relied on the US to support its own neo-colonial domination over the South-West Pacific, where China is currently increasing its economic and diplomatic influence. Successive governments have joined the US-led wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Asked whether she was worried that AUKUS could heighten tensions with China, Ardern did not reply directly. She said “we have worked hard, as Australia has done, to ensure greater engagement by the United Kingdom and the United States in our region... we want peace, we want stability and we want a rules-based order that is preserved.”

Defending the “international rules-based order” is the pretext given by the US for its militarisation of the Indo-Pacific, including provocative naval exercises near territory claimed by China in the South China Sea.

Ardern stressed that New Zealand is making “an extraordinary investment” in the Defence Force, in order to play its part in the region. The Labour-led government is currently spending \$20 billion on airforce and navy upgrades, as well as expanding the army. Hundreds of millions have also been poured into the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), which carries out electronic surveillance throughout the world, including against China, and shares it with the US.

Ardern’s Labour Party initially formed a coalition government in 2017 with the xenophobic, anti-Chinese NZ First Party and the Greens. The Ardern government was welcomed by the US embassy, which made clear that the Trump administration was unhappy with the previous

National Party government's support for closer economic relations with China.

In 2018, the government released a Strategic Defence Policy Statement which, for the first time, identified Russia and China as the major "threats" to global stability. This was combined with a reorientation of New Zealand's military and diplomatic resources to counter China, known as the "Pacific Reset," which was praised by the US.

At the 2020 election, two Chinese-New Zealand MPs—the Labour Party's Raymond Huo and National's Jian Yang—resigned after being denounced in the media and by pro-US academics, without any evidence, as "agents" of the Chinese Communist Party.

Despite strengthening military and intelligence ties with the US, the Ardern government remains reluctant to align explicitly and decisively against China, which receives about one third of New Zealand's exports. This reliance has only increased amid the global economic turmoil triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the US ramps up its confrontation with China, however, the Ardern government's balancing act is becoming more and more precarious, and divisions are widening in New Zealand's ruling elite.

The pro-business Newstalk ZB radio host Heather du Plessis-Allan bluntly stated: "[AUKUS] is a defence pact clearly targeting China but we don't want to target China. China is our biggest trading partner."

A *New Zealand Herald* editorial criticised the AUKUS, saying it contributed to "continual tension that could spill into conflict." It said the Australian government had "thrown its lot in completely with the US, despite America's decline over the past two decades as an international political and moral leader with its wars, struggling democracy, and doubts over its reliability as an ally."

On the other hand, sections of the political establishment expressed disappointment at New Zealand's non-inclusion in the deal. New Zealand First leader Winston Peters, who was deputy prime minister from 2017-2020, told TVNZ that AUKUS was necessary to "defend liberty and freedom" in the Indo-Pacific against China. He called for New Zealand to spend "far more" on its own military.

The opposition National Party appears to be shifting towards greater alignment with the US, having been seriously destabilised by the media and political establishment's anti-China campaign. National leader Judith Collins—the party's fourth leader since 2017—said it

was "disappointing" that the government had not participated in the AUKUS discussions. "It raises serious concerns about the interoperability of New Zealand's defence force systems with our traditional allies in the future."

Despite the militarist record of all parties in parliament, and Ardern's statement welcoming AUKUS, Labour's pseudo-left supporters are promoting the illusion that the government will stay out of the escalating preparations for war. Writing on the trade union-backed *Daily Blog*, columnist Chris Trotter said the government "will happily stay as far away from this lunacy [AUKUS] as possible."

The blog's editor Martyn Bradbury called for "an independent foreign policy to navigate between America and China," which were both "human rights abusing Empires." Bradbury added, however, that he favoured "a vastly larger military," and New Zealand's military spending should increase from 1.1 percent to 3 percent of gross domestic product.

He said this was necessary "to defend our full territory," including NZ's vast exclusive economic zone—an area of ocean about 15 times the size of NZ—as well as the country's Pacific semi-colonies Tokelau, Cook Islands and Niue, and the Ross Dependency in Antarctica, which is claimed by New Zealand.

Notwithstanding its anti-American demagoguery, the *Daily Blog* has repeatedly echoed US propaganda against China—including the lie that the coronavirus pandemic originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The blog also depicts China as a threat to both New Zealand and the Pacific region.

No one should be fooled by Bradbury's claim that he wants a purely "defensive" military "independent" of the US alliance. The blog represents a layer of the upper middle class that has embraced New Zealand imperialism in the Pacific; and maintaining these neo-colonial interests depends on support from the United States and Australia.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact