

New Zealand media pushes alarmist propaganda over China's relations with Kiribati

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The tiny nation of Kiribati, a series of 32 atolls straddling the equator between Fiji and Hawaii, has become the latest Pacific state to become embroiled in the escalating confrontation by Washington and its regional allies against China.

The Kiribati government last week decided to open its UNESCO World Heritage marine park to commercial fishing in order to bolster desperately needed revenues. The Phoenix Island Protection Area (PIPA) was established in 2006, is more than 400,000 square kms in size and is home to more than 250 coral species and 520 species of fish. It was closed for fishing in 2015 with losses from fishing licences of over \$US150 million.

News reports on November 11 and 12 by Television NZ (TVNZ) claimed that there was “deep suspicion” that China aimed to plunder fish in this area, producing a “Pacific disaster.” It further alleged that Beijing wants to “develop strategic infrastructure” and gain a “military foothold” near US waters.

Not a shred of evidence was produced for these lurid allegations. It was simply presented as a given that China is involved and that Beijing's aims in New Zealand's “own backyard” are nefarious.

According to TVNZ, opening up PIPA offers China access to one of the world's biggest exclusive economic zones. “This is an attractive proposition for China's fishing interests,” the report alleged, ignoring the likelihood that corporate fishers from the US, South Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere will also be drawn to the area.

Unsubstantiated “fears” were raised that China is gaining a “tight grip” on the financially troubled island nation, echoing broader allegations by Washington that

Beijing is engaged in “debt trap diplomacy.” In a key policy speech earlier this month, New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nania Mahuta criticised Beijing's loans, claiming Pacific nations are “vulnerable to increasing debt levels that will set their people back in some quite catastrophic ways potentially.”

TVNZ characterised Kiribati as a “gateway” for China to access Pacific waters historically dominated by the US. Anna Powles from Massey University's Defence and Security Centre in Wellington declared: “Kiribati has real strategic value to China if it could potentially develop some strategic infrastructure on Kanton Island, which has commercial fishery usage but potential military usage as well.”

In May, Kiribati announced that with China's assistance it was exploring the feasibility of upgrading an airstrip on remote Kanton, built by the US during World War II. The project is designed to improve transport links and bolster tourism. The island is 1,600 nautical miles southwest of Hawaii and, according to TVNZ, is “uncomfortably close” to major US military bases.

Kiribati's President Taneti Maamau bluntly denied the airstrip would be used for military purposes. China's Foreign Ministry also insisted that plans were at the invitation of the Kiribati government and designed solely to facilitate domestic transport.

Maamau rejected “assumptions” that the government's decisions were influenced by “external parties,” condemning such comments as inaccurate and hypocritical, driven by “neo-colonial precepts.”

The TVNZ reports were nevertheless uncritically referenced by international outlets, including the UK *Independent*, and Australia's Channel 9 TV and *Sydney*

Morning Herald. Citing the same reports, the government-sponsored Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) published a commentary claiming China “is said to want to develop the Kanton airstrip.”

ASPI maintained that Washington retains “continuing rights” under a 1979 Treaty of Friendship and Territorial Sovereignty between Kiribati and the United States, declaring that US-built facilities “shall not be made available to third parties for military purposes except with the agreement of the Government of the United States.”

Questioned by the Associated Press, Wang Wenbin, a Chinese embassy spokesperson in Canberra, declared that Beijing’s affairs with Kiribati were “conducted in an open and above board” manner and called for an end to “unwarranted hype.”

In 2019, Kiribati cancelled its 23-year allegiance to Taiwan and restored diplomatic ties with China, in return for a \$NZ66 million grant. At the time, the US reacted with considerable fury. The *Washington Post* wrote that as “a strategically important island state,” Kiribati’s loss was a casualty of an intensifying Chinese government campaign “to cut off Taiwan’s diplomatic partners.”

Since the end of World War II, the US has regarded the entire Pacific as an “American lake” and has orchestrated coups and fought two bloody wars in Korea and Vietnam in order to maintain its dominant position in Asia.

The US is militarising the north-west Pacific, including new basing arrangements, covering a vast area from Hawaii, through Micronesia to Guam. Washington’s military build-up, including provocative naval exercises close to the Chinese mainland in the South China and East China Seas, is supported to the hilt by its imperialist allies, Australia and New Zealand.

The Kiribati issue was raised at a bilateral meeting between NZ Foreign Minister Mahuta and her Australian counterpart Marise Payne in Sydney on November 12. Payne said Australia was seeking further information, but insisted that Canberra would always “protect our sovereignty, our interests, our security.”

The TVNZ-led media beat-up is replete with neo-colonial arrogance and hypocrisy. Kiribati is one of the world’s poorest countries, designated by the UN as a “least developed nation” and by the World Bank as a “fragile” state.

The opening up of PIPA to commercial fishing doubtless has potentially devastating consequences for maritime conservation. It is however an invidious decision, driven by sheer economic desperation. Like many Pacific islands, Kiribati urgently needs money and infrastructure to protect itself from the effects of rising sea levels. Beyond 2030 its very existence is in jeopardy due to climate change.

Kiribati’s plight is the result of a history of brutal colonial oppression, including by New Zealand. It only gained formal independence from the United Kingdom in 1979.

By 1950, hundreds of millions of tonnes of phosphate were exported from Banaba Island to fertilize farms in New Zealand and Australia, sold for half the market rate. Some 90 percent of the island’s surface was stripped bare, leaving it all but hollowed out. Residents are currently being forced to seek international aid to obtain clean water.

In September, Kiribati’s President Maamau condemned the AUKUS defence pact between the US, UK and Australia, which will see Australia supplied with nuclear-powered submarines. He said the deal puts the entire region at risk and raises “troubling memories.”

The UK and US carried out more than 30 atmospheric nuclear tests at Kirimati Island, part of the Kiribati chain, between 1957 and 1962. “Our people were victims of nuclear testing ... we still have trauma ... with that in mind, with anything to do with nuclear, we thought it would be a courtesy to raise it, to discuss it with your neighbours,” Maamau declared.

The unsubstantiated accusations against China over Kiribati are just one element of an escalating campaign vilifying Beijing as Washington, backed by Wellington and Canberra, recklessly ratchets up its military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war.



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