

New Zealand faces ongoing pressure to upgrade anti-China stance

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New Zealand's newly installed Labour Prime Minister, Chris Hipkins, visited his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese on February 7. It was his first overseas trip as leader after he assumed office on January 25 following the resignation of his predecessor, Jacinda Ardern, a week earlier.

New Zealand media focussed largely on issues around citizenship rights and Canberra's contentious "501" deportee policy introduced by the former Liberal government. Under this, New Zealanders who acquire criminal records can be forcibly repatriated, even if they have lived most of their lives in Australia. Following repeated protests from Wellington, Albanese has agreed to moderate the operation to make what he claimed would be "common sense" decisions based on individual circumstances.

The Australian media was far more interested in Hipkins' position on China. His first two questions at the leaders' press conference were on defence and security issues, forcing Hipkins to give assurances over New Zealand's foreign policy direction.

One reporter, claiming that Ardern had been reluctant to stand up against "bad behaviour by China" asked if he was concerned about Chinese "coercion" in the Pacific. Hipkins replied that a change in prime minister did not mean a change in foreign policy. "China is an important partner for New Zealand—an important trading partner and a partner in other areas as well. That doesn't mean there aren't going to be areas where we disagree from time to time," he said.

Albanese answered the same question, stating that dealings with China would be done in Australia's "national interest" and all else would flow from that.

The New Zealand ruling elite's unsteady balancing act between China and the US is not sustainable. The country is a minor imperialist power allied with the US and Australia and relies on both to support NZ's own neo-

colonial interests in the Pacific. The US military is preparing for war against China within as little as two years and Australia is already putting itself on the front line, strengthening its military integration with the US, including stationing nuclear capable US bombers in Darwin.

Stuff political editor Luke Malpass noted that for an Australian audience, Hipkins' "calibration was not quite right." There are longstanding and vociferous complaints in Canberra that New Zealand is "softer" on China. New Zealand is part of the Five Eyes intelligence and security alliance which includes Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States, but Wellington has often been accused of failing to "pull its weight."

In a speech at the Lowy Institute in Sydney last July, Ardern sought to downplay New Zealand's support for the US-led military build-up in the Indo-Pacific. She defended New Zealand's trade relationship with China and said "even as China becomes more assertive in the pursuit of its interests, there are still shared interests on which we can and should cooperate."

In 2021, Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta declared she was "uncomfortable" using the Five Eyes intelligence grouping to criticise China over human rights. While New Zealand escaped the trade sanctions and breakdown in diplomatic relations experienced by Australia under the Morrison government, NZ Trade Minister Damien O'Connor had caused consternation by suggesting Australia should speak with more "respect" and "diplomacy" in its dealings with Beijing.

Victoria University of Wellington commentator Geoffrey Miller told NZ's Today FM that the focus of Hipkins' talks with Albanese was on "unity" between the two countries. "That's what Australia and their ally the United States really want at the moment," he said, noting that the two powers want New Zealand "on-side" on their geo-strategic competition in the "new cold-war" with

China, especially in the Pacific.

The reality is that while Hipkins and Ardern have both sought to smooth over tensions with China, Labour has significantly strengthened the alliance with the US over the past five years. A New Zealand defence policy statement in 2018 for the first time identified China and Russia as “threats” to the international order, and New Zealand has integrated itself completely into the US-led proxy war against Russia in the Ukraine.

While there have been calls for New Zealand to be made a part of AUKUS—the trilateral security pact between Australia, UK and US—Hipkins reaffirmed New Zealand’s commitment to be nuclear-free. “Australia and the US and the UK are incredibly important security partners for New Zealand, but our nuclear-free policy has not changed,” Hipkins said.

Albanese said defence cooperation with New Zealand would continue alongside AUKUS, and that NZ remains an important defence partner. AUKUS “is about a whole range of issues, including the inter-operability of our forces and also it is co-operation on technology and other issues,” he said.

Another questioner, noting that Wellington’s defence budget is just over one percent of GDP, asked whether New Zealand is “relying too much on Australia” for its defence. Without giving specifics, Hipkins declared his government was going through major changes in its defence policy and making a “significant transformation” with major investments in the portfolio.

The Labour-Greens coalition has massively increased military spending into the armed forces. Defence Minister Peeni Henare last year launched a policy review aimed at ensuring that the Defence Force is “fit for purpose” amid “the intensification of strategic competition, and a world which is seeing a brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia.” Henare boasted that the government had already overseen “historic investments” worth “\$4.5 billion in 12 major defence capability projects,” including new aircraft and armoured vehicles.

Albanese said he and Hipkins “also discussed the great value we place on our role as members of the Pacific family” and praised “positive developments” in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The 18-member body had been under pressure after Kiribati announced last year it would withdraw following a dispute over the appointment of the Cook Islands’ Henry Puna as general secretary. Fiji’s new Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, visited Kiribati last month, in an Australian government-supplied aircraft, to convince Kiribati to remain in the forum.

The PIF has been used by Australia and New Zealand for decades to pressure small and impoverished nations in the region. Following interventions last year by US President Biden and Vice-President Harris, the PIF has assumed central importance in Washington’s agenda to confront China diplomatically, economically and militarily in the Pacific.

While Hipkins was in Australia, Mahuta was sent on a visit to India to restore relations with the strategically significant country. In Wellington last October, India’s external affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was publicly critical of New Zealand’s unwillingness to renew visas for Indian students who had left during the COVID-19 pandemic and called for “fairer and more sympathetic treatment.” The comments dominated Indian media coverage of his visit, the first in 20 years by an Indian foreign minister.

In an interview with the *Hindustan Times* last week, Mahuta falsely described India as a “counterbalance to the superpower contest,” and told ABP Live “we need to figure out who we can trust, who we can rely on in this time of need and India is such a significant contributor to ensuring greater peace and stability in the region.”

In fact, Mahuta’s trip occurred just a week after US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland visited Nepal, India and Sri Lanka. India is Washington’s principal military-strategic partner in South Asia. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has been transformed into a frontline state of the US war drive against China. New Delhi has developed bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral alliances with the US, Japan and Australia, with clear implications for New Zealand.

The only way to stop what is quickly developing into a third world war is through the socialist strategy to unify the working class in an international anti-war movement, aimed at putting an end to the capitalist and nation-state system.



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