

Australian defence minister visits New Zealand to strengthen anti-China alliance

Tom Peters
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Richard Marles, Australia's defence minister and deputy prime minister, visited neighbouring New Zealand last week and met with his counterpart, New Zealand Defence Minister Andrew Little. In a press statement the Australian government said the visit would "deepen our defence cooperation to ensure we remain capable and effective in responding to our region's multi-faceted security challenges."

New Zealand's Labour Party-Greens coalition government is coming under increasing pressure from Australia and the United States to unambiguously line up behind the escalating drive towards a Third World War against both Russia and China.

To prevent the emergence of China as a rival to US global hegemony, American imperialism and its allies have militarised the entire Indo-Pacific region. The Biden administration is seeking to goad China into invading Taiwan to provide a pretext for war.

New Zealand is a member of the US-led "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing network and a close ally of Australia. The Labour government is actively supporting the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, having sent hundreds of troops to assist with training Ukrainian forces in the UK.

So far, however, Wellington has been reluctant to openly join in the provocations against China, which is New Zealand's most important trading partner.

Last month Kurt Campbell, US national security coordinator in the Biden administration, also visited Wellington and reportedly discussed whether New Zealand could play a role in the anti-China AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) military pact. A major component of AUKUS is an agreement for Australia to be supplied with nuclear-powered attack submarines, as part of the country's transformation into a frontline base of operations for the coming war.

At a joint press conference on April 6, one journalist asked Marles: "[If] a conflict was entered between Australia and China, would you expect New Zealand to come to the party?" The minister dodged the question, saying, "I don't think it helps to speculate on hypotheticals." But he left no doubt that this is the message being conveyed by Canberra, declaring, "There is obviously a greater alignment between Australia and New Zealand than Australia has with any other country on the planet. We are kind of in whatever we're in together."

Minister Little said that he and Marles "didn't specifically talk about" AUKUS. However, the New Zealand government is considering participating in "pillar two" of the military agreement, which involves sharing advanced military technology to strengthen the interoperability of the countries' forces.

At present, New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation would prevent nuclear-powered submarines from entering the country's waters.

Little told the bFM radio station that a final decision has not been made, but said "in terms of a general contribution to the capability of our services, obviously [joining AUKUS pillar two] would be an attractive thing to do." While saying it "makes sense" for New Zealand to strengthen ties with Australia, the US and the UK, Little hypocritically accused China of "militarisation" in the Pacific region.

He falsely depicted Australia's military build-up as defensive, saying China had "significantly increased the size of their navy, the size of their army and their airforce, they've significantly increased their nuclear weaponry, to the extent that Australia has made the judgement call that they need to increase their defences."

Minister Little did not mention the vast expansion of

US military spending, including on its nuclear arsenal, and its growing presence throughout the Indo-Pacific region, including the stationing of troops in Taiwan, and basing agreements in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. The US and its allies regularly carry out provocative naval exercises near China, including in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

There are tactical divisions within the New Zealand ruling class about the advisability of openly embracing AUKUS, due to the risk of economic retaliation from China. Opposition National Party foreign affairs spokesman Gerry Brownlee told the Australian Associated Press on March 23 that he was concerned AUKUS was painting China as the “enemy” and the deal would not make the region safer.

Former Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark recently tweeted that any association with AUKUS “would be damaging to [New Zealand’s] independent foreign policy.”

On April 8, a *New Zealand Herald* editorial stated that “New Zealand’s balancing act on strategic tectonic plates is not getting easier as the gap widens under our feet.” It noted that, in addition to “hugging closer to Australia,” New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta attended a recent NATO foreign ministers’ meeting in Brussels, where she met with European leaders and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Even as the imperialist alliance moves closer to direct war with Russia, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has lashed out at China, telling journalists on April 4: “[China] echoes Russian propaganda and it props up Russia’s economy.” He said NATO is “now stepping up our cooperation with our partners in the Indo-Pacific: Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia.”

Last year, the then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern became the first New Zealand leader to address a NATO summit, supporting its warmongering against nuclear-armed China and Russia.

Meanwhile, the Labour government is spending billions on upgrading its military and intelligence agencies. On April 2, *Stuff* revealed that \$300 million is being spent on a new data centre at an air force base in Auckland, which will store information collected by the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), which carries out surveillance as part of the US-led Five Eyes in Asia, the Pacific and

internationally.

The government is also desperately trying to stem the high attrition rate in the army, navy and airforce, which together lost 29.8 percent of their full-time uniformed and trained staff over the past two years. In February, \$10 million was spent in one off “retention payments” of \$10,000 were made to people in “strategically significant” roles across the three services.

All these developments underscore the fact that, notwithstanding the concerns and trepidation from sections of the New Zealand political establishment, the country remains an integral part of the US-led war preparations. As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand’s bourgeoisie has always relied on its alliance with the US and Australia; it supported the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and now Ukraine, as a quid pro quo, to ensure support for NZ’s own predatory interests in the Pacific and more broadly.

There is widespread anti-war sentiment in the New Zealand working class. It would be a fatal mistake, however, to believe that Labour, the Greens, National or any of the other capitalist parties can be pressured to keep out of World War III. A real anti-war movement can only be built in the fight to unify the international working class, including in NZ, Australia, Russia, Ukraine, China and the US, to overthrow the capitalist system that is the source of war.



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