

New Zealand PM visits China amid growing war tensions

Tom Peters
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Last week, New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins carried out a six-day visit to China, aimed at strengthening trade and economic ties. He was accompanied by Trade Minister Damien O'Connor, Tourism Minister Peeni Henare and 29 business leaders.

Hipkins' visit to China was the first by a New Zealand PM since 2019. It took place against a backdrop of escalating anti-China provocations from the United States and the raging US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which US imperialism views as a first step towards war with China.

Washington is determined to maintain its status as the world's hegemonic power, even if that means plunging the world into a war involving nuclear-armed countries. New Zealand and Australia, minor imperialist powers in the Pacific region, are viewed as important junior partners in the US war plans.

Summing up the conundrum facing New Zealand's ruling elite, Radio NZ said "increasingly, the country is being asked to choose between its number one trading partner, China, and its traditional Western security allies. It's no easy decision, considering China accounts for nearly 30 percent of this country's total exports of goods and services."

In a press release, Hipkins described the main aim of his China visit as boosting New Zealand's exports of agricultural and other products, and to promote tourism and international education. In addition to trade, China was New Zealand's "second-largest source of tourists... and is a significant source of international students, so it's a critical part of our economic recovery," Hipkins said. The New Zealand economy recently entered a recession and is highly exposed to the global downturn.

In a statement which made international headlines, Hipkins told reporters on June 22 that he disagreed with

Joe Biden's comment branding Chinese president Xi Jinping "a dictator." Hipkins said: "the form of government that China has is a matter for the Chinese people."

Hipkins described his meeting with Xi last Tuesday as "warm and constructive conversation" and "at no point adversarial." Xi, for his part, told a media conference that China viewed New Zealand as "a friend and a partner" and praised Hipkins for making clear "that you value Chinese-New Zealand relations and will continue to strengthen cooperation with China." The countries' relationship had "contributed to regional peace and stability and prosperity," he said.

The New Zealand PM also received positive coverage in the Chinese media. The *Global Times* declared: "While some Western countries [are] following the US in containing China, New Zealand continues to strengthen stable economic and trade cooperation with China."

Significantly, New Zealand's main opposition National Party leader Chris Luxon told Radio NZ there was "strong bipartisan alignment" on foreign policy and he praised Hipkins' visit to China as "very constructive." He agreed with Hipkins' decision not to call Xi a "dictator."

The visit will be viewed with concern in Washington. Both Australia and the US are placing pressure on New Zealand to fall more decisively in line with war preparations which includes the AUKUS military pact, which will supply Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines.

Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent US-aligned academic in New Zealand, told Radio NZ: "It really is very unsatisfactory that we have, still, such dependence on the China market, or perceived dependence, when we know there's a really serious political risk."

At the same time, however, Brady noted that “New Zealand is showing, with its actions, what its policy priorities are on security.” She said it was highly significant that Wellington hosted a two-day meeting of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network, which coincided with Hipkins’ meeting with Xi.

According to a joint statement from the Five Eyes, ministers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the United States “committed to further collaborate on policy, regulatory, intelligence, operational and enforcement responses, to build our collective resilience against the hostile actions of state actors.” Although China was not named, it is clearly the target of such measures along with Russia. New Zealand’s spy agency, as part of the Five Eyes, has carried out surveillance against China and across Asia and the Pacific.

Hipkins’ next trip will be to the NATO summit in Lithuania on July 11, which will discuss the next escalation in the war against Russia. New Zealand soldiers are stationed in Britain where they are assisting in training Ukrainian forces for the war.

South Korea, Australia and Japan will also send representatives to the Lithuania summit, as the military alliance deepens its presence in the Indo-Pacific region. In May, the Chinese government sharply criticised a plan to open a NATO office in Japan, saying it would “destroy regional peace and stability.” NATO leader Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly lashed out at China for its alleged support of Russia.

As New Zealand approaches an election on October 14, pressure will undoubtedly be brought to bear on both major parties to take a more overt anti-China stance. In the lead-up to the 2017 election, Brady played a major role in attacking the then-National Party government’s business ties with China. When the election failed to produce a clear winner, US ambassador Scott Brown publicly indicated that Washington wanted a change of government, after which the far-right, anti-Chinese NZ First Party chose to form a coalition with Labour instead of National.

While the New Zealand ruling class clearly remains anxious to maintain good relations with China in order to prevent a disastrous economic collapse, the fact remains that New Zealand is deeply integrated in US-led war plans on a global scale.

There is no anti-war faction in any of the

parliamentary parties, which all fully support the war against Russia. Successive governments have sent troops to join in the imperialist wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. The current Labour government has committed to major spending increases on the military, while it starves health, education and other vital public services.

The headlong rush towards a catastrophic Third World War to redivide the world’s markets and resources can only be stopped through the mobilisation of the international working class. The new anti-war movement must base itself on the understanding that the source of war is the capitalist and nation-state system, which must be overthrown and replaced by a workers’ government and socialist planned world economy.



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