

New Zealand joins US threats over Red Sea shipping attacks

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11 January 2024

The far-right National Party-led New Zealand coalition government has integrated the country's foreign policy even more closely with Washington as the US-Israeli assault on Gaza threatens to expand into a disastrous region-wide conflagration.

On January 3, the White House released a belligerent statement warning Yemen's Houthi rebels over their escalating attacks on commercial shipping vessels in the Red Sea. It denounced the Houthis' attacks as "illegal, unacceptable, and profoundly destabilizing" and deemed them "a direct threat to the freedom of navigation that serves as the bedrock of global trade in one of the world's most critical waterways."

The statement was released in the names of the imperialist "Five Eyes" intelligence partners—the US, Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand—as well as Bahrain, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands and Singapore.

The statement declared the Red Sea, which accounts for about 15 percent of global shipping, to be vital for international commerce—that is for capitalist financial interests. "International shipping companies continue to reroute their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, adding significant cost and weeks of delay to the delivery of goods, and ultimately jeopardizing the movement of critical food, fuel, and humanitarian assistance throughout the world," it declared.

As in every situation, the US seeks to impose its hegemony in all corners of the globe, including by military force. The White House-led "final warning" concluded with the ultimatum: "We remain committed to the international rules-based order and are determined to hold malign actors accountable for unlawful seizures and attacks."

Following the statement's release, the UN Security Council scheduled a vote yesterday on a US draft resolution that would condemn and demand an immediate

halt to attacks by the Houthis on merchant and commercial vessels in the Red Sea area. The resolution passed, and the US and Britain now appear to be moving towards an imminent military action against Yemen.

Claiming justification under international conventions designed to prevent genocide, the Iran-aligned Houthis have been seeking to prevent ships registered to Israeli owners from passing through the Red Sea until Israel stops its attack on Gaza.

They have targeted at least 25 cargo ships with missiles, drones and small boats. Confronted with this new challenge to its support of Israel's war, the Biden administration sought to organise an international naval operation, ostentatiously dubbed "Operation Prosperity Guardian," but failed to get significant support after several nations withdrew.

On 31 December, US military helicopters responded to a call from a Singapore-flagged container ship that was being attacked by Houthi boats. The US forces sank three of the four fragile Houthi craft, killing 10 fighters. The incident prompted fresh threats from US and UK officials, who declared they were considering airstrikes on Houthi targets in Yemen.

The statement is another turn in the escalating international confrontation. Justifying New Zealand's involvement, Defence Minister Judith Collins told Radio NZ it was important to condemn the attacks because New Zealand "is so dependent on supply lines." The Houthi attacks were a "direct threat to New Zealand interests," she claimed. Collins would not be drawn on what any "consequences" might be but warned: "clearly something is being contemplated."

Collins added that a dozen NZ Defence Force personnel are already deployed to a multinational force in Bahrain that "protects maritime security across the Middle East." Meanwhile, NZ's corporate media is clamouring for a vast increase in military spending from the current 1.3

percent of GDP to 2 percent.

Foreign Minister Winston Peters followed up Collins' comments with a call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, announcing on X/Twitter on January 5 that they had discussed the importance of the US-NZ strategic partnership, strengthening cooperation to address "regional and global challenges," the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Peters, who is leader of the far-right populist NZ First Party in the coalition, is a long-time Washington asset. He was first installed as foreign minister by Labour following the inconclusive 2017 election, during which US Ambassador Scott Brown publicly declared the National Party government had been too soft on China. Under the Labour-NZ First government, Peters led a "Pacific Reset" policy to encourage greater US involvement in the region.

Washington and its allies have far-reaching plans to attack mainland Yemen as the Middle East spirals into a wider war. With Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant claiming that Tel Aviv is at war with multiple countries, it has attacked Lebanon, Syria and Iran. The US maintains a massive offensive military force in the Middle East, including an aircraft carrier strike group with more than 4,000 sailors and 50 aircraft. The ultimate target of this build-up is Iran.

Minor imperialist powers including New Zealand are aligning themselves with the war drive, which marks a new redivision of the world, threatening global conflict. With the support of every parliamentary party, New Zealand sent troops to the UK to assist in training Ukrainians to serve as cannon fodder in the US-NATO war with Russia. Last year, Labour's then defence minister Andrew Little declared that New Zealand had to prepare its military in case it was "called on" to join a war against China.

There is, however, growing alarm in sections of the ruling elite over the massive popular opposition at home and abroad to the US-Israeli slaughter in Gaza, including New Zealand's complicity with it, and the implications of the eruption of the wider Middle East conflagration.

On X/Twitter retired senior diplomat Carl Worker warned that by associating so directly and publicly with the US threat against the Houthis, New Zealand "is liable to be seen by many in the global community as aligning with the Israel/US position on Gaza, to the extent of declaring willingness to involve itself militarily in Yemen if required." The *Otago Daily Times* similarly warned that the "stakes are high and it could end up being a mistake."

Former Labour prime minister and ex-UN official Helen

Clark called the NZ-endorsed statement a "slippery slope" and urged the West to seek a "political solution to the Gaza situation."

Clark, who sent New Zealand troops to the illegal US-led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, continues to promote the myth of the country's "independent" foreign policy. In December she urged the incoming government to "stay in a dialogue" with Israel and Palestine to "find peace, not protract war." Clark did not condemn the US and Israel but blamed the "extremes" on both sides who were "talking about having everything from the river to the sea. If those are the positions, they'll fight for the rest of my lifetime and everybody else's," she cynically declared.

As elsewhere, tens of thousands of ordinary people have taken part in weekly protests around New Zealand over the past two months demanding a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the slaughter. Many have responded to the government's joint statement with blunt disdain. A widespread criticism on social media is that New Zealand "has placed more value on shipping containers than the lives of Gazan children."

On Wednesday, the Houthis attempted their largest attack yet, targeting a US ship in retaliation for the earlier killing of rebels. Carrier-based jets and warships from the US and UK navies shot down 21 drones and missiles. Asked about possible strikes on targets in Yemen in response, UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps said: "Watch this space," adding he had "no doubt" Iran was behind such attacks.

New Zealand is being placed at the service of US imperialism for a much wider regional war ultimately targeting Iran. As the WSWS has pointed out, Iran is not looking for war with the United States, but Washington is looking for war with Iran. For the Biden administration, the Middle East is another front in what is a developing world war aimed at ensuring US global hegemony, the main targets of which are Russia and China.



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