

# New Zealand foreign minister seeks to block Chinese influence in Southwest Pacific

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New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters undertook a four-day tour of three Pacific Islands states beginning on February 7, hard on the heels of a visit to Australia that saw a strengthening of security and defence ties between the two key US allies in the region.

Central to the discussions with Australian ministers was the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) military agreement, part of the US-led “architecture” aimed at preparing for war against China. It includes arming Australia with hypersonic missiles and nuclear-powered submarines. New Zealand is seeking to join “pillar two” of the agreement, involving non-nuclear technology sharing.

Peters’ trip is part of a coordinated campaign by the US and Australia to block Chinese influence among the Pacific island states, which are insignificant economically but are strategically important due to the large areas of the southwest Pacific that they occupy. Australian foreign minister, Penny Wong, since assuming office, has engaged in multiple visits throughout the region to cajole and bully Pacific island governments.

On his latest tour, Peters travelling with Shane Reti, who holds the Pacific Peoples and Health portfolios, met with Tonga’s acting prime minister and the prime ministers of Cook Islands and Samoa. All three countries are vulnerable, impoverished micro-states considered by New Zealand’s ruling elite as part of its sphere of influence and are being pressured to join the escalating US-led confrontation with China.

It was Peters’ second tour of the Southwest Pacific following his December visit to Fiji where he met with Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, Tuvalu Prime Minister Kausea Natano, and Henry Puna, then secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Peters’ first stop-over was in Tonga, 2,400 kms from Auckland with a population of 108,000. Tonga is ruled by a reactionary hereditary monarchy with a parliament composed of 17 elected “commoner” MPs and nine representatives of the elite privileged “nobles.”

Peters arrived amid a constitutional crisis. A week earlier

Tonga’s King Tupou VI, who is deeply unpopular, declared he had lost confidence in Prime Minister and Defence Minister Hu’akavameiliku Siaosi Sovaleni and Foreign Minister Fekita ‘Utoikamanu. Attorney-General Linda Folaumoetu’i advised the prime minister and Cabinet that the letter revoking the ministerial appointments was unconstitutional, leading to an ongoing standoff.

While the issues involved in the dispute are not being publicly aired, Peters would doubtless have registered New Zealand’s concern about political instability. In 2006 when pro-democracy riots devastated the capital Nuku’alofa, Australia and New Zealand dispatched troops to defend their strategic and economic interests and prevent the crisis from spiraling out of their control.

Seeking to push back against China’s influence, the US has recently established an embassy in Tonga. The imperialist powers profess concern about the country’s economic reliance on Beijing. Roughly 80 percent of Tonga’s foreign debt, more than \$US120 million, equivalent to a quarter of its annual GDP, is held by China. This year Tonga will spend more on servicing debt than on health. The debt burden is set to balloon over the next five years as the deadline looms on loans.

In a post-Cabinet press conference, Peters referenced “the debt that was incurred by some policies that were maybe wise and some not so wise.” He offered nothing apart from opening a new pharmaceutical warehouse partially funded by a \$2.4 million New Zealand contribution. Tonga’s head pharmacist Leva’itai Asaeli said while she welcomed the facility, the country needed at least 20 pharmacists to meet the health needs of people. Tonga only has seven.

The Tongan government said Peters discussed priority areas for cooperation in climate change, cyber security, health and education. Acting Prime Minister Samiu Vaipulu described New Zealand as a “trusted friend,” citing “security risks” and regional geopolitical pressures and the importance of “working together.”

The Cook Islands, Peters’ second stop, with just 17,000 inhabitants, is a neo-colonial “realm” country of New

Zealand. While self-governing, Wellington provides colonial oversight, including over foreign affairs, defence and security. Washington announced last year that it would recognise the Cook Islands and Niue as “sovereign states,” portending more direct intervention in their affairs.

Touting climate change as a focus, Peters delivered \$NZ16.5 million—another paltry offering—ostensibly to help fight the resulting crisis. Climate change already impacts the Cook Islands, including coastal erosion from sea level rise.

Official discussions were reportedly dominated by the Cook Islands government’s proposal for a trilateral security and defence deal involving NZ and Australia. Details have not been released but Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown stated on January 26 it “would support expansion of cooperation in cyber security and air and maritime border security,” building on extensive military and surveillance activity by the imperialist powers.

The proposal is clearly aimed against China, which provides tens of millions of dollars in loans and development aid. Beijing has also sought to establish a form of security cooperation with the islands. In December, Cook Islands Police Inspector Maeva Kirikava visited Beijing along with senior police from Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. China’s Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong hosted a meeting with them titled “Ministerial Dialogue on Police Capacity Building and Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries.”

Samoa, Peters’ final stop, provides the majority of Pacific Island immigrants and seasonal workers to New Zealand. The election of Wellington-educated Fiam? Naomi Mata’afa as prime minister in 2021 immediately saw the abandonment of a Chinese-backed port development in a realignment towards New Zealand and the US. Fiam? said the \$US100 million project would have significantly added to the country’s exposure to China.

Peters signed a renewed New Zealand-Samoa Statement of Partnership, which pledges a major expansion of “security” engagement. It says the two countries will; “Strengthen cooperation, including on information and assessment exchange in: police and law enforcement, law and justice, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cybersecurity, health security, and border security.”

Missing from the New Zealand government’s anodyne official press briefings was any reflection of the issues of central concern to the Pacific: the threat of a looming and catastrophic nuclear war and expansion of the AUKUS pact.

Radio NZ reported on February 12 that keeping the Pacific nuclear-free, in line with the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga, was a “recurring theme” from the island leaders. The Treaty prohibits signatories, which include Australia and New Zealand, from placing nuclear weapons within the South

Pacific.

Fiam? openly addressed regional concerns about AUKUS, calling on Canberra and Wellington to ensure that “the provisions under the maritime treaty are taken into consideration,” and saying; “We don’t want the Pacific to be seen as an area that people will take licence of nuclear arrangements.” Cook Islands’ PM Brown confirmed that the Pacific leaders were all in agreement.

Peters’ two trips into the region since taking office last November represent a further move to corral the tiny island states behind the local imperialist powers and the US.

The far-right National-ACT-NZ First coalition government, following its Labour predecessor, is strengthening New Zealand’s integration into US war plans on every front. It fully supports the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia, Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza, and has sent military personnel to support the bombing of Yemen.

One significant outcome of last month’s meeting of Australian-NZ foreign and defence ministers was a declaration that the ANZUS alliance could be revived. Under the 1951 ANZUS Treaty Australia and New Zealand, as minor imperialist powers, served as policemen for the US in the region.

In 1986 Washington suspended its obligations to New Zealand under ANZUS in response to the Lange Labour government’s ban on nuclear-powered vessels—a move warmly welcomed as a landmark stance across the Pacific.

Now, NZ Defence Force chief Air Marshal Kevin Short told a parliamentary committee last week that under conditions in which Australia is “reshaping’ its defence force for “a singular threat from a singular direction”—that is, China—Canberra is being “very open and frank” about pressuring New Zealand to upgrade its military.

The consolidation of the defence alliance with Australia is a further assurance that the NZ ruling elite will step up in the US-led drive for control of the vast Pacific region that was a bloody and decisive theatre of conflict in World War II.



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