

New Zealand and Australia discuss expanding AUKUS military pact

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The governments of New Zealand and Australia are taking forward discussions to expand the AUKUS security pact currently involving Australia, the US and UK, which is part of the US-led build-up for war against China. A promise by Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles to send officials to Wellington for briefings was fulfilled late last month.

According to the *New Zealand Herald* on February 26, a secretive "fly in, fly out" visit from Canberra had taken place. New Zealand Ministry of Defence deputy secretary Anton Youngman confirmed that Australian officials visited Wellington to brief their local counterparts. Officials will now continue "regular engagement with the AUKUS partners, as we build our understanding of pillar two," Youngman said.

The discussions follow a meeting between the two countries' Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministers in Melbourne in January. New Zealand's recently installed far-right government is seeking to join pillar two of the agreement, which includes sharing non-nuclear technology in areas such as cyber and aeronautics.

A joint statement from the talks falsely declared that AUKUS makes "a positive contribution toward maintaining peace, security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific." NZ Defence Minister Judith Collins made it clear the government was considering what "benefits" AUKUS could provide and what New Zealand could "bring to the table."

AUKUS is an aggressive alliance, part of the US-led "architecture" established to prepare for war against China. It has met considerable opposition in the Pacific. During NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters' trip to the region last month, Samoa's Prime Minister Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa voiced concerns about AUKUS, saying "We don't want the Pacific to be seen as an area

that people will take licence of nuclear arrangements." Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown confirmed that Pacific leaders were all in agreement.

Involvement by New Zealand in pillar one of AUKUS, which provides for Australia to buy nuclear-powered submarines from the US and UK, was initially ruled out by the previous Labour-led government, given its implications for the country's nuclear-free policies which remain widely supported within New Zealand and around the Pacific.

The National Party, now leading the governing coalition, was critical of AUKUS while in opposition. Its foreign affairs spokesperson Gerry Brownlee last year said the deal would not make the country safer. Now, National and its far-right partners ACT and NZ First are drawing New Zealand closer to Washington and Canberra on every geo-strategic and military front. The government fully supports the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia, Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, and has sent military personnel to support the US bombing of Yemen.

The previous Labour government left the door open for collaboration on pillar two, saying it was separate from the nuclear submarine deal and that New Zealand did not want to see the militarisation of the Pacific. Conscious of not getting offside with the country's major trading partner, China, Labour's Foreign Minister Nania Mahuta bluntly asserted in mid-2023: "We're not part of the AUKUS arrangements."

Papers released to media, however, showed the Labour government strove to "recalibrate" the key message to show it agreed with the "rationale" behind AUKUS. Then Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said "New Zealand agrees with the AUKUS partners that the collective objective needs to be the delivery of peace and stability and preservation of an international

rules-based system in our region.”

Now in opposition, Labour is seeking to contain rising anti-war sentiment in the working class and among young people by making limited and thoroughly hypocritical criticisms of AUKUS. Although the party has not finalised its position, associate foreign affairs spokesperson Phil Twyford last month called AUKUS an “offensive warfighting alliance against China,” rhetorically asking parliament: “If there’s a war in the South China Sea ... is it this government’s intention to be dragged into that conflict on the side of the US?”

In fact, Labour’s former defence minister Andrew Little had already spelled out exactly that. At the launch of a major Defence Policy Review last August Little declared: “If, for example, conflict does break out in the South China Sea, where \$20 billion of our exports flows through every year, we have a stake in that, and we may be called on to play a role should conflict break out. We need to be equipped for that and prepared for it.”

Labour’s current Foreign Affairs spokesperson David Parker told Radio NZ last month the visiting Australian officials would “probably be trying to sell” AUKUS. Labour would not be privy to those talks, he said, but the “benefits and disadvantages” must be looked at. Parker stopped short of saying the new government should not be exploring pillar two. “We’re questioning its utility and whether it is wise,” he declared.

Labour’s hypocritical posturing is a desperate attempt to recover popular support following its drubbing in last October’s election, which saw its share of the vote drop from 50 percent in 2020 to 26.9 percent amid widespread anger over its attacks on living standards at home and militarism abroad.

In a sign of the contempt with which Labour is now held, both Parker and Twyford have been booed at recent anti-genocide rallies where they feigned sympathy with the people of Gaza, while asserting that Israel has the “right to defend itself.”

Over the past six years, Labour strengthened New Zealand’s military and intelligence alliance with US imperialism, the main backer of the Zionist state. It also sent troops to Europe to assist in training Ukrainian conscripts for NATO’s proxy war against Russia; and maintained New Zealand’s troop presence in Bahrain, embedded with US forces, which are widening the war in the Middle East.

Sections of the ruling class meanwhile remain concerned that involvement with AUKUS is aligning the country too openly with the US.

Last month former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark teamed up with her 2005 election rival, then-National leader Don Brash, to criticise the pact. In a joint opinion piece in the *New Zealand Herald* on February 12 they wrote that the government had decided “to throw in our lot with America’s attempt to slow China’s economic rise and keep it tightly hemmed in by American forces” in the region and appealed to Prime Minister Christopher Luxon to reverse course.

However, as a minor imperialist power in the Pacific and a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, New Zealand is already deeply integrated into the US war plans. Clark herself, as prime minister from 1999-2008, strengthened New Zealand’s alliance with Washington by committing troops to the criminal US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Biden administration is deeply involved in the current Australia-New Zealand discussions. Last week, Bonnie Jenkins, the US Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, a senior official leading the State Department’s work on AUKUS implementation, visited Wellington and met with Defence Minister Collins and officials.

Jenkins was due to deliver a speech on Friday hosted by Victoria University of Wellington’s Centre for Strategic Studies, titled “Meeting 21st Century Security Challenges Together,” which had to be abandoned. Pro-Palestine student groups and other protesters disrupted the event, with one asking the audience to bow their heads in silence to “think about all the Palestinians who have died from US-funded weapons in the last few months.” Repeated interruptions by protesters forced the talk’s cancellation.



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