

New Zealand foreign minister ramps up anti-China campaign

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New Zealand's Foreign Minister Winston Peters is being sued for defamation following a verbal attack on former Australian Labor Party foreign minister Bob Carr who criticised NZ's plans to become part of the anti-China AUKUS pact between Australia, the UK and US.

Carr visited Wellington last month to speak at a symposium, hosted by the Labour Party, with former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark. Carr urged New Zealand not to acquiesce to American interests. He labelled AUKUS as “fragrant, methane-wrapped bullshit” and said he admired New Zealand's foreign policy for being not as “gullible to the Americans” as Australia's.

As it moves to strengthen New Zealand's military relations with the US and Australia, NZ's far-right government is angling to join “Pillar two” of AUKUS, which involves developing and sharing advanced military technologies. Under AUKUS, Australia will acquire nuclear-powered attack submarines. New Zealand has not been invited to join “Pillar one” due to its 1987 anti-nuclear legislation.

In an interview on Radio NZ (RNZ) last Thursday, Peters called Carr “a Chinese puppet” when asked about his comments. “What on earth does he think he's doing walking into our country and telling us what to do?” Peters demanded.

Further derogatory comments by Peters were removed from the radio station's website because of their legal risk. Carr told the station he considered the remarks to be “entirely defamatory” and would instruct his lawyers to commence action.

The following day Peters doubled down, posting on X (Twitter): “We should never be accepting of any irrelevant ill-informed shill from some other country to walk into New Zealand and try to tell us what to do. Here in New Zealand, we respect something called a ‘country's independent nationhood’.”

In a speech to the New Zealand China Council the same

day, Peters criticised China over its activities in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and “cyber attacks” within New Zealand—echoing Washington's anti-China propaganda.

Peters declared: “China has a long-standing presence in the Pacific, but we are seriously concerned by increased engagement in Pacific security sectors. We do not want to see developments that destabilise the institutions and arrangements that have long underpinned our region's security”—that is, post-World War II “arrangements” established by Washington to ensure its global hegemony.

Peters' belligerent stance is a signal that the National Party-NZ First-ACT government is determined to clamp down on any opposition to its involvement in the escalating US-led preparations for war against China. This includes battering into line sections of the ruling class elite, including some in the government's own ranks, concerned about the threat to NZ's trading relations with Beijing, the country's largest market.

Peters, who leads the nationalist anti-immigrant NZ First Party in the coalition, is a long-time Washington “asset.” In 2017, NZ First formed a government with Labour instead of National, and Peters became foreign minister, after US Ambassador Scott Brown publicly declared the previous John Key-led National Party government had been too soft on China.

Clark and Carr, among others, have criticised government efforts to join AUKUS, declaring it to be a shift away from New Zealand's so-called “independent foreign policy.” Clark's 1999-2008 Labour government, however, played a key role in boosting the military alliance with the US by sending troops to join the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Similarly, as foreign minister in 2012-13 Carr backed the Obama administration's “surge” of troops into Afghanistan and the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. He is, along with former Prime Minister

Paul Keating, part of a minority wing of the Australian political establishment that fears the economic consequences of participating in a full-blown war with China, also that country's largest export market.

Peters recently visited Washington to reinforce New Zealand's presence in the anti-China alliance. He also attended a NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels where he reiterated the government's support for the escalating US-NATO proxy war against Russia over Ukraine.

Mindful of broad opposition to AUKUS at home and among Pacific Island governments, Peters last week used a speech to the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs (NZIIA) to claim the government is still "a long way" from joining. He misleadingly said Pillar 2 of AUKUS is "not a military alliance" but a technology sharing mechanism being in response to a "deteriorating strategic environment." In fact, technology developed under AUKUS will have direct military applications.

Before the NZIIA audience, consisting mainly of political and academic insiders and international diplomats, Peters delivered a stark picture of the global situation, declaring it "the worst that anyone today working in politics or foreign affairs can remember."

Peters hypocritically excoriated "Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine," which was in fact deliberately provoked by the US and NATO and is being relentlessly escalated by the imperialist powers. He noted that NATO member states had "seriously lifted defence spending" amid their commitment "to respond collectively to Russian aggression."

Shedding crocodile tears for the "catastrophe" in Gaza, Peters called for "Israel, Iran, and Iranian proxies to pull back from the brink." New Zealand's government is not an innocent bystander in the genocidal war against Gaza: it has supported Israel's actions and sent troops to the Middle East to assist the US in bombing Yemen to defend supply lines for the Zionist regime.

On the Asia-Pacific, Peters warned that the region's "strategic environment is not benign, far from it. Remorseless pressure is being exerted across it as beachheads are sought and influence peddled." The term "beachheads" is a clear reminder of the bloody battles fought across the Pacific during World War II.

New Zealand is an imperialist power whose ruling elite regards much of the South West Pacific as its own "back yard." In alliance with Australia and the US, it aims to roll back the increasing competition from China for influence in the region.

Parroting Washington's anti-China talking points, Peters declared that "the tensions we see there are another example of the rule of law, and maritime security, being recklessly and unnecessarily challenged."

In fact, responsibility for the soaring tensions rests squarely with the US and its allies, which have militarised the entire region, including by sending troops and billions of dollars in weapons to Taiwan.

In one revealing incident at the NZIIA meeting, Peters stopped speaking to demand security remove a sole protester. An elderly woman stood and silently held up a sign saying "diplomacy" with a tick, and "AUKUS" with a cross.

In response to Peters' tirades, the Chinese embassy in New Zealand posted a statement on May 4 that emphasised strong "economic and trade cooperation" between the two countries and said China "want[s] to continue to regard New Zealand as a good friend and important partner."

Labour's opposition leader Chris Hipkins has called for Peters to be stood down, saying Carr's defamation action was "embarrassing for New Zealand," and showed Peters had abused his office. National Party Prime Minister Christopher Luxon flatly rejected the call, saying Peters was doing an "exceptionally good job."

There is bipartisan agreement between the establishment parties over the confrontation with China, the only differences being tactical. Labour's foreign affairs spokesman David Parker told RNZ that Labour are "not peaceniks" and he stood by the last Labour government's repeated declarations that China was a "regional threat."

Parker maintained that "the case for AUKUS has still not been laid by the government." He remained non-committal about Labour's position, declaring "we shouldn't be lurching into it." There is little doubt, however, about Labour's support. Indeed, former Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern welcomed AUKUS when it was first announced in September 2021.



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