

New Zealand government alarmed by Cook Islands deal with China

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The Cook Islands is set to strike a comprehensive strategic partnership with China, triggering a hysterical response from New Zealand's government and media, which brands the deal as a major diplomatic victory for Beijing.

The US is seeking to secure its unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance over the Pacific amid advanced preparations for war against China. Washington's allies, New Zealand and Australia, are locked in an intense campaign to nullify Beijing's influence.

Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown is visiting China from February 10-14, where he will sign the agreement. Brown declared: "We must look at other ways to ensure that we have a sustainable economy and partnering with like-minded countries. In this regard, it's going to be important for us to maintain our prosperity levels."

The visit follows trips to China last year by Fiji's Sitiveni Rabuka, Jeremiah Manele and Charlot Salwai, the prime ministers of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa of Samoa. All met with President Xi Jinping and secured economic agreements.

Brown's visit was arranged in December during a trip to the Cook Islands by Zhaoxu Ma, China's Executive Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, the highest-level visit by a Chinese government official.

According to the *Cook Islands News*, the meeting "explored opportunities to deepen cooperation in critical areas such as economic development, agriculture, health, education, infrastructure, cultural exchange and climate change response." Brown told TVNZ that the agreement would be made public once signed but disclosed that it included deep sea mining.

The deal caught Wellington by surprise and, according to TVNZ reporter Barbara Dreaver, set "alarm bells ringing." The National Party-led government says it could breach constitutional arrangements between the two countries. Along with Tokelau and Niue, the Cook Islands is part of New Zealand's neo-colonial "Realm countries" in so-called "free association" with Wellington.

A tiny nation of about 15,000 people, the Cook Islands can

ostensibly make its own policy decisions while maintaining New Zealand currency and citizenship as well as budgetary support and aid. Under the longstanding agreement, the two nations must "cooperate and consult" on defence and security, but in reality Wellington has always assumed control over the Cook Islands' foreign affairs and defence.

In 2023 US President Biden announced, as part of Washington's stepped-up "engagement" with the Pacific, that the US would recognise the Cook Islands and Niue as "independent, sovereign nations" and establish diplomatic relations. New Zealand's Labour Prime Minister Chris Hipkins had no option but to "welcome" the move. As a minor imperialist power New Zealand has, since the end of World War II, depended on support from the US to advance its own interests in the Pacific.

In contrast, current Foreign Minister Winston Peters furiously denounced a "lack of openness" and "clarity" about the impending deal with China. "The Cook Islands is entitled to make those decisions themselves," he said. "But we've got past arrangements, constitutional arrangements, which require consultation with us and, dare I say, China knows that."

Peters told Radio NZ (RNZ) the issue was not with the Cook Islands seeking a new pathway to economic growth, but rather the "process for how that is achieved."

This is a fraud. Peters has long been at the forefront of aligning New Zealand with the US and against China. He told the NZ China Council in May 2024: "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-1945 arrangements established by Washington to ensure its global hegemony.

Peters' spokesperson told RNZ that New Zealand would expect "to be fully consulted on any major international agreements that the Cook Islands plans to enter into that have major strategic and security implications."

Major changes to the New Zealand-Cook Islands

relationship, including policies which could entail the Cook Islands moving towards full independence from New Zealand, the official declared, “must be decided by the Cook Islands people via a referendum.”

In response, Brown flatly declared there was “no need for New Zealand to sit in the room with us while we are going through our comprehensive agreement with China.” As for being consulted on “the level of detail that they were requiring, I think that’s not a requirement,” he said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun told the Associated Press this week that China and the Cook Islands’ relationship “should not be disrupted or restrained by any third party.” Noting that diplomatic relations between the two were established in 1997, Guo said China “stands ready to work with the Cook Islands for new progress in bilateral relations.”

Media coverage in New Zealand is increasingly belligerent and threatening, including allegations that the Cook Islands is acting like a rogue state. In a February 10 column headlined “Should New Zealand invade the Cook Islands?”, Matthew Hooton, right-wing columnist for the *New Zealand Herald*, claimed that Brown’s “illegal” dealings with China are about “secession.”

Hooton demanded that the constitutional “responsibilities” be defended militarily if necessary. “It would be a relatively straightforward military operation for our SAS to secure all key Government buildings in the Cook Islands’ capital Avarua, which is not much bigger than, say Whangamata [a NZ regional holiday town],” he declared.

Brown has now halted a plan for a separate Cook Islands passport after Peters declared that any applicants would have to renounce their New Zealand citizenship. Brown retorted: “New Zealand has bared its teeth. The New Zealand government has said that they are willing to go to change the law in New Zealand to punish Cook Islanders.” Some 94,000 Cook Islanders live in New Zealand and over 7,000 in Australia.

Peters is also involved in a diplomatic spat with another small Pacific nation, Kiribati. Last month he declared aid for Kiribati would be “reviewed” after he claimed Kiribati’s President Taneti Maamau cancelled a meeting in what was to be the first visit to the islands by a New Zealand foreign minister in five years. Kiribati flatly blamed NZ for cancelling its own proposed visit. Wellington spent \$NZ102 million on Kiribati’s development program from 2021-2024.

A TVNZ report asserted that “Kiribati has been on a path of self-isolation from Western countries and many in the Pacific since switching diplomatic allegiances from Taiwan to China in 2019.”

The regional imperialist powers, including Australia, New Zealand and France have maintained neo-colonial control

over the Southwest Pacific for more than a century, keeping the fragile island nations in a state of dependency with conditions of poverty and under-development endemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a devastating blow to the Cook Islands. Tourism, which contributed 70 percent of the nation’s GDP in 2018, abruptly halted as global travel restrictions were imposed. This led to a dramatic decline in national income with widespread job losses, particularly in the hospitality and service sectors with many businesses forced to close permanently.

Peters, who leads the right-wing anti-immigrant NZ First Party in the coalition government, is now seeking to further cement the position of both New Zealand and the United States under conditions of rampant instability and escalating geo-strategic tensions following the Trump’s accession to the White House.

The Trump administration’s 90-day suspension of overseas aid funding and withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO) have reportedly caused widespread concern across the region. Pacific governments, who confront rising sea levels and frequent climate change-driven disasters, are also alarmed about Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement.

In 2022 the WHO disbursed \$US9.1 million in the Pacific islands across 320 projects, contributing to programs to support at-risk health systems. USAID, an instrument of US foreign policy, which is now being dismantled by Trump, reportedly provided \$US3.4 billion over a five-year period to the Pacific.

Trump’s agenda to counter China in the Pacific and escalate preparations for war will involve the heavy-handed prioritisation of US interests over those of the Pacific islands. As the WSWS noted on the suspension of the USAID program, Trump “disdains the ‘soft power’ methods represented by the USAID, in favor of brute force and economic bullying.” New Zealand and Australia will be required to follow suit.



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