

# Cook Islands signs strategic agreement with China

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Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown completed a week-long state visit to China on February 14, signing a “comprehensive strategic partnership” to boost relations with Beijing.

The agreement was signed at a meeting with China’s Premier Li Qiang and Minister of Natural Resources Guan Zhi’ou. Brown said it provides a “structured framework for engagement” between the Cook Islands—a small Pacific semi-colony of New Zealand—and China, for five years.

Before Brown’s trip, New Zealand’s Foreign Minister Winston Peters furiously denounced a “lack of openness” and “clarity” about the deal. “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 claimed that the issue was not with the Cook Islands seeking a pathway to economic growth, but with the “process for how that is achieved,” but a *Washington Post* commentary on February 14 cited an anonymous New Zealand government official who said: “We have concerns about the Chinese state military apparatus penetrating deeply into a country that is part of the New Zealand realm.”

Tensions are escalating as the US seeks to secure its unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance amid advanced preparations for war against China. Australia and New Zealand, which have maintained neo-colonial control over the Southwest Pacific for more than a century, keeping the fragile island nations in a state of dependency, are locked in an intense campaign to nullify Beijing’s regional influence.

In 2001, New Zealand and the Cook Islands signed a Joint Centenary Declaration, which broadly states that the two governments must “consult regularly on defence and security issues.” Peters demanded that the Cook Islands share the proposed text of the agreement with China before it was signed.

Speaking to Radio NZ, former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark joined the pile-on, demanding to know, “Why has the prime minister damaged the relationship with New Zealand by acting in this clandestine way?” Clark insisted the Cook Islands was “not independent of New Zealand, as signified by its people carrying New Zealand passports. Cook Islands is free to

change that status but has not.”

In fact, the Declaration nowhere defines the scope and nature of bilateral “consultations.” Moreover, it explicitly affirms the Cook Islands’ right to enter independently into “treaties and other international agreements” with any governments and international and regional organisations.

Brown maintained New Zealand was advised that the deal with Beijing would not include matters on security and that there was “no need for New Zealand to sit in the room” while it was drawn up.

After the signing, Brown released a press statement declaring the agreement “complements, not replaces, our long-standing relationships with New Zealand and our various other bilateral, regional and multilateral partners.” It was done, he said, in the “same way that China, New Zealand and all other states cultivate relations with a wide range of partners.” He said there was no reason for NZ to be concerned.

The now released six-page document is broad in scope, referring positively to China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the US-backed Blue Pacific development strategy adopted at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2022. It pledges cooperation to strengthen economic and environmental resilience, infrastructure, and on cultural exchanges. It also promises to “explore areas for further cooperation within the seabed minerals sector.”

A section pledges ongoing cooperation in multilateral organisations such as the UN, and a commitment to opposing nuclear proliferation in the Pacific. Both countries’ missions in Wellington will be the facilitators of communication and cooperation, with the establishment of diplomatic and consular institutions in each country to be explored.

The two countries will commit to joint briefings before regional meetings. This will involve discussions prior to the Cook Islands’ hosting of any regional meetings that China ordinarily attends, such as the PIF, “to identify ways in which we can support each other as both hosts and participants to advance our collective regional interests.”

Despite its vagueness, the agreement has caused alarm both in Wellington and Washington, which are intent on rolling back China’s influence.

Peters responded with a terse statement saying he intended to

“engage with the Cook Islands government in the days ahead.” Suggesting there are other unreleased agreements, he demanded they be published “without delay” so that there is “clarity on the substance and scope of the intended cooperation.”

The episode highlights growing resentment in Pacific countries, which are largely impoverished, with limited infrastructure, geographically isolated and threatened by climate change. The Cook Islands was ruled by New Zealand as a colony from 1901 to 1965 and since then has been self-governed in so-called “free association” with New Zealand. Wellington has always assumed the right to dictate on foreign affairs and defence policy.

Peters released an official statement on February 15 listing the areas Wellington had purportedly worked “hand-in hand” with Cook Islanders, including in health care, emergency support, environment, governance, defence and cultural festivals.

The truth is that in 2024 New Zealand’s far-right government committed a paltry \$NZ20 million in budget support over two years for education, health and tourism. New Zealand’s total aid budget has seen a dramatic decline of 35 percent, decreasing for the first time in eight years, from \$1.32 billion in 2023/24 to \$1.21 billion in the coming year.

The government also slashed funding for skills, training and employment programs for Pacific people, including tens of thousands of Cook Islanders, who live in New Zealand and are among the poorest workers.

China has had diplomatic relations with the Cook Islands since 1997 and has been a development partner since 2001. Grants from China have been used for public infrastructure such as the courthouse and police station as well as agricultural equipment and water pipes.

New Zealand officials raised that if the Cook Islands gained full independence—which Peters said should be decided by referendum—it could lead to significant loss of aid and access to New Zealand’s health and education systems. The threat has prompted significant concern among the local population.

On Monday, a 400-strong protest led by opposition MPs took place at the islands’ parliament. Protesters waved placards stating “Stay connected with New Zealand.” Democratic Party leader Tina Browne called for Brown’s proposal for a local passport to be off the table “forever and ever.” She accused the government of “risking our sovereignty, risking our relationship with New Zealand.”

One prominent protester was New Zealand’s Te P?ti M?ori co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer. Te P?ti M?ori, which represents the interests of indigenous capitalists in NZ, routinely postures as an opponent of “colonisation,” but Ngarewa-Packer upheld Wellington’s domination over the islands. She announced her agreement with Peters and Prime Minister Christopher Luxon about the “lack of consultation” by the Cook Islands, and said she opposed “a few things that Mark Brown has done politically,” singling out his “aggression” on

seabed mining.

The media, meanwhile, has whipped up an hysterical anti-China furore. The *New Zealand Herald* published a column on February 10 by far-right commentator Matthew Hooton proposing that New Zealand should militarily “invade” the Cook Islands. The article was endorsed by the pro-Labour Party *Daily Blog*, which demanded an increase in military spending to secure control over the islands.

On February 13, the *Herald*’s daily podcast interviewed retired Auckland University international relations professor Stephen Hoadley, who formerly served in the US Navy. Hoadley made unsubstantiated and inflammatory claims that if China gained access to fishing rights in the Cook Islands, the Chinese coast guard and navy would not be far behind.

New Zealand is now considering moving to include specific national security clauses in agreements with Pacific Island nations. According to *Newsroom*, these would be modelled on the neo-colonial deals Australia has recently signed with Tuvalu and Papua New Guinea which explicitly give Canberra the right to veto any engagements with other states on security and defence-related matters.

The government is signalling it will lift the military budget from 0.9 to 2 percent of GDP at a cost of an extra \$NZ3.2 billion. Foreshadowing the increase in comments delivered to the recent Munich Security Conference, Defence Minister Judith Collins emphasised that the Pacific is “sparsely populated with an underwater continent with enormous wealth on the seabed. The mineral wealth is... like having an enormous treasury with a very small lock.”

In this context it was naïve, Collins declared, “to think that the Pacific is without threat.”

The talk of threats—that is, to imperialist interests—and greater military spending are a warning that the government is prepared to do to ensure the subservience of the Cook Islands and other island states that it regards as part of its realm.



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