

Continuing hysteria in NZ over Cook Islands' deal with China

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The New Zealand political and media establishment continued to ratchet up tensions with the Cook Islands over the past week, as more details were released about the small Pacific country's recent agreement with China.

In mid-February, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with the Chinese government. The deal was furiously denounced by New Zealand, which has long maintained a neo-colonial relationship with the Pacific nation as one of its so-called "Realm" countries along with Niue and Tokelau.

The document is broad in scope and worded in general terms. It pledges cooperation to strengthen economic and environmental resilience, infrastructure and multilateral bodies. It also promises to "explore areas for further cooperation within the seabed minerals sector."

In the New Zealand media, the deal has been hysterically denounced as a threat and used to justify the ongoing integration of the country into US-led plans for war against China.

While New Zealand's Foreign Minister Winston Peters insisted he should have been consulted and seen the text before it was signed, Brown argued his country has the right to act as a sovereign and independent state.

On his return, Brown faced a 400-strong protest led by opposition MPs—backed by the New Zealand media and politicians—who claimed Cook Islanders' rights to NZ citizenship were under threat. Fears were inflamed by statements from Peters that a referendum could be called over the Cook Islands' move to full "independence." Brown defeated a motion of no confidence in parliament over the affair, as well as a previous proposal to introduce a Cook Islands passport to replace the New Zealand one.

The war of words escalated following the release of an additional memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Cook Islands and China. TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver declared on February 22 that the MoU, *Deepening Blue Economy Cooperation*, "shows a raft of partnerships including building ports and ships, many of which will be problematic from New Zealand's security

perspective."

She noted that the release followed exercises by three Chinese warships in the Tasman Sea—which were seized upon by the New Zealand and Australian governments to justify major increases in military spending.

The MoU provides for investment cooperation in wharves, shipbuilding and repair, ocean transportation and deep-sea fishing bases. It also spells out that China and the Cook Islands will encourage business investment in green technology, jointly promote innovation in marine science and technology, green and low-carbon technology, and "promote the application and transformation of science research achievements."

New Zealand media and foreign policy circles erupted with outrage. Jose Sousa-Santos of Canterbury University's new Pacific Regional Security Hub told TVNZ, "This could enable China to have a resupply capacity for its navy in the Pacific facilitating its presence and acts of intimidation in the region, as seen by the recent live fire exercises in the Tasman Sea."

Massey University security studies professor Anna Powles told Radio NZ: "China, through commercial actors, will be able to establish a significant strategic presence and reach into the Pacific." She claimed that the infrastructure would be used to support dozens of extra Chinese coast guard vessels. "A number of those vessels are very large, very sophisticated, one of them which is larger than any Australian naval fleet," she ominously warned.

Right-wing *New Zealand Herald* columnist Matthew Hooton, who earlier proposed that New Zealand troops should "invade" the Cook Islands, belligerently declared on February 28 that China's agenda is "to turn our Pacific neighbours into vassal states, with their resources exploited by Chinese companies, their governments unable to participate in international affairs without Beijing's agreement, and the ports Beijing promises turned into a network of naval bases."

Pro-Labour Party *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury, an anti-China zealot, fulminated that the MoU was "far worse

than we possibly feared—this is a direct challenge to NZ sovereignty.” Denouncing the deal as “treason,” he claimed that China will immediately flood any port “with their Chinese fishing militia and they will start actively plundering New Zealand’s fishing stock.” What the Cooks had done, Bradbury fumed “cannot stand.”

The New Zealand authorities should not have been surprised by the MoU. Following a meeting between Brown and China’s NZ Ambassador Wang Xiaolong in Auckland last September, the Cook Islands Foreign Affairs Ministry posted a statement on areas identified for “expanded co-operation.” The list included a multi-use transport hub in the Northern Cook Islands, inter-island transportation, digital connectivity and infrastructure.

Brown has hit back at the NZ critics for their “ludicrous” and “ignorant” perspectives on the deals, implying they view the Cook Islands as “too dumb” to understand the implications of its own decisions. He slammed suggestions that China will establish a military presence in the islands.

“This is not about consultation. This is about control,” Brown declared, accusing Wellington of using “state media” to “drown out” his government.

According to Brown, the Cook Islands needs to “stand on our own two feet.” “We need to build the infrastructure to enable that, so harbours and ports need to be upgraded, airports need to be sealed so that we can have better connectivity with better flights, cheaper fares to the Pa Enua (the islands outside Raratonga),” he said.

New Zealand’s ruling elite, whose interests in the Pacific are solely geo-strategic, has never exhibited any concern over the needs of the impoverished Cook Islands and its 15,000 inhabitants. The median income on the main island of Rarotonga was just \$NZ18,000 in 2021, and in the outer islands a mere \$11,000 a year. The Cook Islands were devastated by their isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-22.

NZ ruled the islands from 1901-1965 and since then has operated a neo-colonial, so-called “free association” arrangement in which Wellington assumes the right to dictate on foreign affairs and defence policy.

Far from assisting the Cook Islands to develop the infrastructure required to administer 15 islands spread over a vast ocean area of 2,200,000 km² (850,000 sq miles), New Zealand has restricted itself to paltry and patronising aid hand-outs. Last May, the Cook Islands secured just \$NZ20 million over two years in Core Sector Budget Support and \$10.5 million for public sector “strengthening” from Wellington.

The propaganda that China wants a military foothold in the Pacific turns reality on its head to justify the accelerating preparations for war by the US and its regional allies. In

recent years, xenophobic campaigns have been waged in Australian and New Zealand media over projected wharf developments in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands involving China.

The imperialist powers are the ones stepping up military operations across the region aimed at Beijing. In 2022 the Solomon Islands government was threatened with a regime change operation if it allowed a permanent Chinese military presence. The US has signed a security deal with Papua New Guinea (PNG) giving its forces open access to the strategic Manus Island naval base. Fiji has been earmarked for intensifying military ties aimed against China.

China’s ambassador Wang has not specifically commented on the Cook Islands furore but released a statement last week saying that as far as Beijing is concerned, the Pacific is “not a chessboard and should not become one.” Defining the “raison d’être of a country” (i.e. China) in terms of “imaginary island chains concocted to blockade or contain other countries is naive and even dangerous,” he warned.

New Zealand’s ruling elite is determined to maintain its grip on the errant neo-colony. Peters confronted the issue directly with China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi last week in a visit to Beijing. He reportedly reminded China that New Zealand’s “status with the Cook Islands as a realm country was very different than that with other Pacific nations.” Peters testily claimed he learned more about the agreements from China than he had from the Cook Islands.

The ongoing diplomatic fracas exposes the fraudulent posturing that New Zealand and Australia routinely deploy about being benevolent paternal leaders of the “Pacific family.” Amid escalating geo-strategic tensions, any perceived threat to their imperialist interests will be increasingly met with bullying and brute force in order to maintain subservience among all the tiny island states.



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