

Cook Islands PM condemns New Zealand's "coercion"

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New Zealand's attempts to "coerce" the Cook Islands over its relationship with China will not work, Prime Minister Mark Brown said in an interview aired on Cook Islands Television last week. He said the Pacific island country still wants New Zealand support but the two countries need to work together as "partners" with the Cooks maintaining its sovereignty.

Earlier in November, it was revealed that New Zealand's National Party-led government had suspended two aid payments amounting to \$NZ29.8 million since February to the Cook Islands. The aid boosts the Cook Islands budget for core sectors including education, tourism and health. Following the withdrawal of the first aid payment in June, Brown said the punitive decision would "harm the country's most vulnerable citizens."

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First party in the ruling coalition, blocked the payments after Brown signed strategic deals with China in February without "consulting" Wellington. Peters claimed prior approval was required under the terms of the Cook Islands' constitutional position as one of New Zealand's semi-dependent "Realm" countries.

Peters told Brown in a letter in October that "the gravity of the Cook Islands' breach of trust" raised concerns about its "approach to the constitutional realities which impose clear limits on your freedom to act on foreign affairs, defence and security matters without reference to New Zealand's interest or those of the Realm." Brown, however, insists that Wellington was advised the China deal would not include security matters and that there was "no need for New Zealand to sit in the room" while it was drawn up.

Peters' diplomatic bullying is part of increasingly belligerent attempts by Wellington to maintain its neo-colonial domination over the impoverished Cook Islands. New Zealand's ruling establishment responded with

outrage over the agreement with Beijing which covered economic development, including fisheries, infrastructure and undersea minerals, as well as strengthening diplomatic relations. The documents contained no military clauses.

In his television interview Brown declared: "The withholding and the pausing of financial assistance, development assistance, we don't feel that that is a useful tool to try and coerce, if you like, a country into changing its policies—it certainly is not going to work with us." By using its cash reserves the government had, Brown said, ensured the funding cut would not affect the delivery of public services, while GDP growth rate meant it was "well placed" for the coming years.

The dispute is an expression of the sharp geopolitical tensions created by the advanced US-led preparations for war against China. New Zealand and Australia—both imperialist allies of the US—are seeking to block China's growing economic and diplomatic influence in the Pacific and are presenting Beijing in increasingly hysterical terms as a military threat. While using aid to pressure Pacific states, they are militarising the region and forcing them to cut economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing.

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." However, the declaration explicitly affirms the Cook Islands' right to enter independently into "treaties and other international agreements" with any government or international organisations.

The Cooks—a tiny state with fewer than 20,000 people—is heavily dependent on outside aid. It has been diplomatic partners with China for almost 30 years, signing agreements to develop local infrastructure, and has diplomatic relationships with 70 different countries.

According to Brown, the Cook Islands government fulfilled its obligations to consult with New Zealand

regarding the content of any diplomatic and economic deals and has followed “established protocol” in its talks with China. “I would not expect any of the countries that we discuss our bilateral relations with... to have them share those documents with a third country, and the reciprocal arrangement would also exist,” he said.

Brown assured the Cook Islands parliament his government is taking steps to mend the rift. Officials and ministers had “engaged consistently with New Zealand across every formal channel that is available to us,” he declared.

Brown however emphasised that the Cook Islands remain self-governing and independent in external affairs and that restoring the relationship must not come at the expense of their growing independence. “While we are fully committed to our relationship with New Zealand, we have learned a valuable lesson in that we’ve seen the risks that arise from over reliance on any single partner for our development needs,” he said.

Brown indicated a willingness to exclude countries other than NZ from involvement in security and defence issues, but this is evidently not enough to satisfy Wellington.

New Zealand, along with Australia, regards the southwest Pacific as its “backyard.” Prime Minister Christopher Luxon declared recently that New Zealand’s funding would remain “paused” until the Cook Islands government took unspecified steps to restore “trust.” The opposition Labour Party has joined in the denunciations of the Brown government, expressing only mild concern that Peters’ hard-nosed approach could be counter-productive.

New Zealand’s universally anti-China media plays a grimy role demonising the Cook Islands over its purported “treachery.” On November 24, the *New Zealand Herald* published an inflammatory “special investigation” alleging that the Cook Islands flag has been flown by over 100 oil tankers “accused of illicitly trading Russian and Iranian oil.” It claims the operation is run by a private shipping registry owned by Maritime Cook Islands (MCI) which was set up in 2000 by “government insiders” and delivers “modest fees” to the Cooks’ government.

According to the *Herald*, the flagged “shadow fleet” enables “pariah countries” Russia and Iran to generate “huge revenues.” It also gives end users, notably China and India, a secure flow of energy at cheap rates while evading unilateral sanctions imposed by the US and Europe. Allegedly, nearly half of the flagged tanker fleet

of 150 vessels has been formally sanctioned by the US, United Kingdom or the European Union.

Brown has refused to comment on the *Herald* story. Peters declared that New Zealand’s support for Ukraine in the war with Russia was being deliberately undercut by the Cook Islands: “This is a completely unacceptable and untenable foreign policy divergence,” he fumed. The flag registry is just one of “a range of actions and statements” by the Cook Islands, Peters said, that have “damaged its free association relationship with New Zealand and the trust that underpins it.”

In other words, any alleged activity that can be sheeted home to the Cook Islands government and construed as inimical to Wellington’s pro-US agenda for escalating war is deemed illegitimate. The Cook Islands and other Pacific countries must accept their subservient neo-colonial status.

Whatever truth is in the *Herald* article, the flag operation is likely similar to those run, among others, by Vanuatu and the Marshall Islands, the sale of “passports of convenience” by Tonga, Nauru and Vanuatu, or the tax havens and offshore financial centres in Fiji, Niue and Samoa, all desperate attempts to attract foreign capital.

Ultimate responsibility for the proliferation of such ventures—many blacklisted by capitalist overseers and financial institutions such as the EU and OECD—lies with the imperialist powers. For the past century they have kept the fragile Pacific micro-states in conditions of poverty, economic backwardness and oppression, while exploiting them for cheap labour and now, for geo-strategic ends in the escalating US-led confrontation with China.



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