

New Zealand signs neo-colonial defence deal with Cook Islands

Tom Peters
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On April 2, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters announced the signing of a new Defence and Security Declaration with the government of the Cook Islands, which he said would establish “a shared certainty” about the “special constitutional relationship” between the two countries.

The declaration cements New Zealand’s colonial domination over the Pacific archipelago. It gives the NZ military unimpeded access to the land, territory and airspace of the Cook Islands, including its vast exclusive economic zone covering an area of 1.96 million square kilometres, roughly the size of Mexico.

The Cook Islands, with a population of just 15,000, is ostensibly self-governing, but it remains part of the colonial Realm of New Zealand, which also includes the islands of Niue and Tokelau. The new declaration reaffirms that the Cook Islands is obligated to share any information with NZ relating to defence or security. It gives Wellington the right to veto any agreement between the Cook Islands and another country on the grounds of “defence and security” of the Realm.

The agreement brings to an end a year-long rift between the two governments, after the Cook Islands signed commercial deals with China without consulting New Zealand beforehand. The NZ National Party-led government retaliated by blocking \$30 million worth of aid in June and November 2025, which is vital for the functioning of basic public services, including health and education, in the islands. This was nothing less than an attempt to destabilise the Cook Islands government led by Prime Minister Mark Brown.

The cancellation of aid was accompanied by a belligerent and hysterical media campaign that accused China of attempting to “take over” the Cook Islands and establish a military presence there. One *New Zealand Herald* columnist even suggested that NZ

troops should invade the territory.

In fact, the Cook Islands-China deal centred on maritime exploration, transport and civilian infrastructure development. While the New Zealand, Australian and US militaries have a heavy presence throughout the Pacific, China does not.

This anti-China campaign—which was backed by the opposition Labour Party and its allies—fed into demands for New Zealand to build up its military forces and integrate further into the aggressive US-led preparations for war against China.

Minister Peters declared that with the new agreement, financial aid would now resume to the Cook Islands. He added that “We look forward now to further enhancing the broad range of cooperation.” Brown told a press conference that the agreement “means that New Zealand is our first port of call on anything to do with defence and security.”

The economic crisis in the islands—exacerbated by the loss of aid—undoubtedly played a key role in the Brown government’s decision to capitulate to NZ’s demands. Peters told reporters that “the question of fuel supply... was discussed” with Brown.

Like many Pacific countries, the Cook Islands relies on diesel to generate electricity, and faces price hikes and potentially disrupted supplies due to the US-Israeli war against Iran. According to *Stuff*, “Some outer islands are already rationing diesel.” Petrol and diesel prices are expected to soon go above \$7 a litre.

The tourism industry, which accounts for 70 percent of GDP, could also be severely affected by rising airfares and power costs. Liana Scott from the Cook Islands Tourism Council told One News: “What happens if the power bills go up two or three times? We’re already paying, in Rarotonga [the main island], approximately seven times what you pay in New

Zealand.”

Peters told One News that the new deal imposes “massive limitations” on China’s agreements with the Cook Islands, without elaborating on what he meant. He added that “it also is a message to the Chinese government, who we’re on good relations with, that there’s a special relationship here between Tokelau, Niue and the Cook Islands and we’re part of it.”

In response, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told the Associated Press: “The China-Cook Islands relationship doesn’t target any third party, nor should it be disrupted or constrained by any third party.” She called for all parties to “respect the independence of island countries.”

Along with heightening tensions with China, the NZ-Cook Islands declaration also portends the further militarisation of the Pacific territory. It says New Zealand “will continue to support the Cook Islands in defence and security capacity and capability, including in, but not limited to, the areas of national security, policing, cyber security, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.”

The document describes “an increasingly complex and contested global and regional security environment characterised by geopolitical competition, disruption, and significant environmental challenges.” This is a thinly veiled reference to China, which the US and its allies have hypocritically accused of destabilising the Indo-Pacific region.

In reality, New Zealand and Australia are both imperialist powers which, in an alliance with Britain and the US, have exercised brutal colonial domination over the Pacific for more than 100 years. New Zealand annexed the Cook Islands in 1901 and put in place a dictatorial and racist regime. During World War I, NZ troops seized Samoa from Germany and imposed a violent and oppressive military administration.

In recent years, Australia has imposed neo-colonial defence agreements on Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Tuvalu and has made belligerent threats against the Solomon Islands for signing security agreements with China. Australia, with NZ’s support, has created a mobile Pacific Policing Initiative and a military Pacific Response Group, both of which are aimed at rapidly deploying forces anywhere in the region to suppress unrest and potentially overthrow governments.

The Pacific experienced extremely bloody battles

during World War II. Now the region is once again being placed on the front lines of preparations for a catastrophic US-led war against China, the main economic and strategic rival of US imperialism.

Meanwhile, people across the Pacific continue to suffer from poverty, soaring prices and a lack of public services, and vulnerability to climate change-related disasters. Countries such as Fiji and PNG are recording high levels of drug addiction, as well as HIV, diabetes and other diseases. All of this is the legacy of more than a century of colonial domination, which is continuing and becoming ever more entrenched.



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