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New Zealand government nervous about US-China confrontation

The US confrontation with China threatens to erupt into open war following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's provocative visit to Taiwan. Beijing had declared that any such visit to the island, which it considers part of China, would have severe consequences. The Chinese military has encircled Taiwan and is carrying out live-fire exercises, which could lead to a direct clash with US, Taiwanese or other forces in the region, giving Washington the pretext it wants for military action.

The danger of war between nuclear-armed powers, which places the entire world population in peril, has prompted considerable nervousness in New Zealand ruling circles. Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-led government has pursued a policy of strengthening NZ's military alliance with US imperialism, while at the same time seeking to maintain strong economic ties with China.

This increasingly fraught balancing act was on display on August 4, when New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta met her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Cambodia.

Previous 13 June, 2022 virtual meeting between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta (Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China)

A statement by the New Zealand foreign ministry highlighted “deep concerns regarding the human rights situation in Xinjiang and the erosion of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong,” echoing Washington’s hypocritical denunciations. Mahuta underscored New Zealand’s alignment with the US and NATO in their war against Russia over Ukraine, urging China to “use its access and influence with Russia” to pressure it to withdraw from Ukraine.

At the same time, Mahuta took a neutral posture in relation to the crisis in Taiwan. The statement called for “peace and stability in the region, including across the Taiwan Strait, and emphasised the importance of de-escalation, diplomacy and dialogue.”

The *Global Times*, part of China’s state-run media, reported favourably on Mahuta’s statement, saying: “New Zealand continues to adhere to the one-China principle, respects China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and stands for upholding the basic norms of international relations.”

The newspaper also pointed to Ardern’s comments on August 1 at the annual China Business Summit in New Zealand, where she marked 50 years of diplomatic relations with China. Ardern said New Zealand had been “firm and consistent in our commitment to our one China policy” and that there was a “long history of engagement, and of beneficial interactions between our governments, our people, cultures and in commerce.” She also indicated that she intends to visit China with a business delegation in the near future.

The theme for this year’s summit, organised by the Auckland Business Chamber and the NZ INC think tank, was to maintain “a balancing act” between trade and “heightened geo-strategic sensitivities.” A statement on the event’s website stressed that trade with China had sustained New Zealand’s economy during both the Global Financial Crisis and the pandemic. The organisers noted that “goods exports from New Zealand to China increased by an impressive 19.8 percent in 2021, taking the bilateral trade relationship to over \$37 billion in goods and services and accounting for 33 percent of New Zealand’s total goods exports.”

Two days after the summit, however, Ardern refused to condemn Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, accompanied by four US warships including an aircraft carrier. She told reporters it was “not for New Zealand or for me to cast judgement on the decisions from other leaders as to

where they visit and why.” Striking a neutral pose, she called for “diplomacy and dialogue to overcome what are tensions, particularly around the Taiwan Strait.”

Such an equivocal position will not be tolerated by the Biden administration, which is demanding unwavering support from its regional allies. Washington’s aim, both in the war against Russia and preparations for war with China, is the imperialist redivision of the world and the crushing of any rival to US global hegemony.

The New Zealand and Australian ruling class, which have their own imperialist interests in the Pacific region, have acted in an alliance with the US since World War II. New Zealand has sent troops to the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Ardern government, which took office in 2017, has continued to strengthen military and intelligence ties with the US, and in 2018 labelled Russia and China “threats” to the global “rules-based order,” i.e., the post-World War II order dominated by the US. Wellington supports the US-NATO war against Russia and has sent military aid to Ukraine, as well as NZ troops to Europe, where they are involved in supplying and training Ukraine’s military.

In a recent visit to Washington, Ardern underscored New Zealand’s commitment to the anti-China build-up, including the US military’s provocative assertion of its “freedom of navigation and overflight, in the South China Sea and beyond.” The joint statement by Ardern and Biden declared: “As the security environment in the Indo-Pacific evolves, so must our defense cooperation,” including interoperability of the armed forces, personnel exchanges, co-deployments, and “defense trade.”

Coinciding with Ardern’s speech at the China Business Summit, US Indo-Pacific commander Admiral John Aquilino made his first visit to New Zealand, where he held talks with New Zealand’s Defence Force chief Kevin Short. Aquilino, who oversees 380,000 military personnel across the Indo-Pacific region, said the visit was aimed at identifying “new areas where we can work together and continue to expand our partnership.”

Aquilino's visit followed his attendance at the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defence Conference in Australia last month, which was attended by military chiefs from 26 countries, including New Zealand's Short. US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley told the media that the three-day meeting was focussed on "the whole situation with the rise of China," which he hypocritically accused of wanting to "dominate" the Pacific.

Meanwhile the New Zealand navy has just finished taking part in the US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercise near Hawaii, from June 29 to August 4. The world's largest maritime exercise, RIMPAC involved 26 countries, dozens of ships and 25,000 personnel, and was a key part of military preparations against China.

Sections of the New Zealand media are demanding a more open, bellicose stance against China and in support of the US. Anna Fifield, Wellington-based editor of the major news website *Stuff*, declared: "Taiwanese people, like Ukrainians, are fighting for us and our values... in the face of authoritarianism." The implication is that New Zealand should be prepared to join a war over the island, as it has in the case of Ukraine.

Fifield, who worked as head of the *Washington Post*'s Beijing bureau until late 2020, urged the Ardern government to follow Pelosi's example and prepare a delegation to visit Taiwan. Similarly, the far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour defended Pelosi's visit, declaring that he was prepared to go to Taiwan if invited.

There is no principled opposition to war within the parliamentary establishment. The Green Party, which occasionally mouths pacifist phrases, has remained silent on Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, which threatens nuclear war. The party is a part of the Labour-led coalition government and has supported all its budgets, which have significantly increased military spending.

Notwithstanding the evident nervousness in business circles about the US-China confrontation, and the hypocritical calls for restraint by Ardern and Mahuta, New Zealand is integrated into the US alliance, the war against Russia, and war plans against China. The only way to stop what is quickly developing into a third world war, is through the socialist strategy to unify the working class in an international anti-war movement, aimed at putting an end to the capitalist and nation-state system. **World Socialist 05.08.2022**