

Australia bullies NZ to toe the Five Eyes line

7 Sept.—Anyone who has kept one eye on the mainstream news in recent months will have noticed the Australian government’s Sinophobic rhetoric growing more extreme almost by the day. Prime Minister Scott Morrison uses every available forum to harangue Asian and Pacific Island nations about the need to form a Cold War-style bloc, under US tutelage, to thwart China’s alleged hegemonic ambitions. In April Defence Minister Peter Dutton proclaimed a “realistic” prospect that Australia would be at war with China relatively soon, and in June floated plans to expand the USA’s military presence on our soil for that purpose.¹ And as these words are being written, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg has just called upon Australian exporters to diversify away from China, declaring it a foregone conclusion that the present breakdown in bilateral relations and consequent loss of market share will continue indefinitely. All of this, we are told, is a product of China’s aggression, expansionism, and antipathy towards so-called liberal democracies like Australia. But the Morrison government has a problem: the more over the top its damsel-in-distress act becomes, the more ridiculous it is made to look when tiny, virtually defenceless New Zealand refuses to play along, and continues for the most part to engage with China on its own terms. In response, Canberra’s political establishment and its pet media are cranking up the pressure on our trans-Tasman cousins to follow Australia’s lead and surrender the making of foreign policy to the Anglo-American-dominated “Five Eyes” intelligence apparatus.

Born of the World War II alliance between the USA and the British Empire, and formalised during the Cold War that followed, officially Five Eyes is merely a mechanism for sharing intelligence between the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, primarily for defensive purposes. Disclosures in 2013 by US intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden emphatically proved, however, that in reality the Five Eyes countries’ intelligence agencies use the arrangement to spy *en masse* on their own and each other’s populations, and on the people and governments of other “allied” nations, as much as upon their prospective adversaries. And lately Australia has taken the lead in a push to expand the remit of Five Eyes to include coordination of international relations, trade and even domestic economic policy.²



NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta at an April press conference told her Australian counterpart Marise Payne that New Zealand was uncomfortable with expanding the Five Eyes’ remit. Photo: Screenshot

The Labour government of New Zealand, however, has outraged the Five Eyes gang by not only resisting this trend, but publicly repudiating it as an affront to its national sovereignty. As the *Australian Alert Service* has reported, these tensions came to a head in April of this year after New Zealand was denounced by British establishment press organ *The Telegraph* for refusing to join the rest of the Five Eyes in accusing China of “genocide” against the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang.³ “We are uncomfortable with expanding the remit of the Five Eyes”, NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta told press on 19 April. In a speech the same day (her first since taking office the previous November) to the New Zealand China Council, a NZ government-funded organisation formed in 2012 to advance bilateral relations, Mahuta declared that “Matters such as human rights should be approached in a consistent, country-agnostic manner”, and that New Zealand would continue to do so in a manner that preserved and respected what she described as a mature relationship with China, characterised by diplomacy and dialogue. (Like Australia, New Zealand established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1972, and counts it as its biggest trading partner.) Whilst at times New Zealand might speak out publicly on various issues, either alone or in association with others who shared its views, she said, “In each case we make our decisions independently, informed by our values and our own assessment of New Zealand’s interests.” Mahuta reiterated these sentiments at a 22 April joint press conference with her Australian counterpart Marise Payne. “The Five Eyes arrangement is about a security and intelligence framework, and it’s not necessary ... to invoke Five Eyes as your first port of call in terms of creating a coalition of support around particular issues”, she said.

Ever since, the Australian political factions that favour conflict with China have been working to strong-arm New Zealand’s political and business leaders into compliance with Australia’s hard line.

Dogs of war

The opening salvo was fired by recently retired senior Australian foreign policy heavyweight Richard Maude. Now the executive director of policy at the Asia Society Australia think tank, Maude was senior foreign policy and national security advisor to Labor Party PM Julia Gillard (2010-13) when she capitulated to then-US President Barack Obama's anti-China "pivot to Asia", acceding to US demands for greater military access to Australia including the permanent presence of a US Marine Corps contingent in Darwin. Maude was also Director-General of the Office of National Assessments (Australia's peak intelligence agency, which reports directly to the PM) in 2013-16, under both Labor and Liberal governments; and head of the task force that developed the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper. He finished his 30-plus year career as deputy secretary in charge of the "Indo-Pacific Group" at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in 2018-19, where his portfolio covered Australia's bilateral relations across Asia and North America.

In an address to the New Zealand government-supported China Business Summit in Auckland on 3 May, Maude lamented that the post-Cold War global order, "an era of unrivalled US dominance" following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, was not yet over but "fading" fast. Echoing Morrison's words of a year earlier, Maude said that the years ahead would be "poorer, more dangerous and more disorderly"; and like Morrison, he laid the blame on a "more powerful, assertive and nationalist China", which he suggested would not only seek to re-write international rules to suit itself but even deny countries like Australia and New Zealand "the space to be ourselves", were it not successfully opposed.

"This is the defining foreign policy challenge of our time", he declared. "If it ever was, *it is no longer possible for democratic countries to isolate concerns* about China's hardening authoritarianism and human rights abuses from other aspects of their engagement with China. ... *US expectations of partner countries will be high*—one of President Biden's highest priorities is to rebuild what he described earlier this year as the 'muscle of democratic alliances'. The policy choices will be harder for everyone; *harder to avoid* and more likely to result in actions that anger China, with all the attendant risk of political and economic retaliation." (Emphasis added.) Furthermore, he said, businesses active in China would henceforth "face higher levels of global scrutiny, for example in relation to partnerships with Chinese companies that might have a connection to the military or security services, or be complicit in human rights abuses. ... *At times, it won't be possible to reconcile these competing interests. Businesses may be forced to choose.*" (Emphasis added.) Maude of course framed all this as friendly advice, but a New Zealand business source told the AAS that all present understood it as both a rebuke to the New Zealand government for Mahuta's remarks a fortnight earlier, and a threat to the business community to toe the line or else, regardless of their political leaders' position.

Another former Australian official who has made similar demands is Joe Hockey, who was treasurer in 2013-15 under Liberal PM Tony Abbott, and Ambassador to the USA in 2016-20. Appearing on the 30 August episode of Sky News's documentary series *The Alliance*, a paean to the 1951 Australia, New Zealand, United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty, Hockey bragged about the "broadening" of Five Eyes, and warned New Zealand to be "very careful" how it juggles its relations with China and its supposed obligations to its intelligence partners. "A relationship can't be based on, overwhelmingly, just one party taking from everyone else", he said. "You need to give, in order to maintain a relationship. And whilst New Zealand is at times fiercely independent ... we can't be 'Four Eyes' or 'Four-and-a-half Eyes'. So New Zealand needs to lift." Current Ambassador Arthur Sinodinos (a former Liberal senator) was more conciliatory, but he too emphasised the importance the USA and Australia place on Five Eyes, in a manner which could likewise have been construed as a warning, albeit a friendlier one.

Feeling the pressure?

Though few details of their private meetings have been published, there is no doubt serving Australian officials have likewise been pressuring their New Zealand counterparts, with some apparent success. This was evident even before Maude's intervention, for example when on 23 March Mahuta joined Payne in expressing "grave concerns about the growing number of credible reports of severe human rights abuses against ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities ... [including] restrictions on freedom of religion, mass surveillance, large-scale extra-judicial detentions, as well as forced labour and forced birth control, including sterilisation." (Though in fact, as the AAS has shown, with the exception of mass surveillance—as part of a counterterrorism program—none of those reports are in any way "credible" at all.) Ten days earlier they had also declared themselves "deeply concerned" about electoral reforms in Hong Kong which they said "undermine[d] rights and freedoms ... guaranteed by China to Hong Kong until 2047 under the Sino-British Joint Declaration", as though that were any of their business in any case. Such "concerns" are standard across the so-called Western world, however, and whilst New Zealand does itself no favours by repeating them, nor does it single itself out.

In recent joint statements, however, New Zealand has repeated substantially more of Australia's recognisable anti-China buzzwords and thinly veiled accusations. In a 31 May missive after the annual Australia-New Zealand Leaders' Meeting held in Queenstown, NZ, for example, New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern and Morrison declared that the two countries "stand together in facing a challenging

global environment ... [including] increasing pressure on the international rules-based system”, and had therefore “agreed on the need for coordinated regional and global action on issues such as human rights”. They also “expressed concern over harmful economic coercion and agreed to work with partners to tackle security and economic challenges”, and effectively demanded China give up its claims to island territories in the South China Sea. None of which will endear Ardern to China, to put it mildly.

Words aside, however, on the issue of bowing to Five Eyes policy diktats New Zealand is still refusing to budge. In a q-and-a session after her own address to the China Business Summit in Auckland, Ardern said that she did not believe her government’s stance had created a “strain” with the USA, but that in any case New Zealand “has always and will always make its own decisions as to various platforms that it uses to raise issues”, and that bilateral, behindclosed-doors diplomacy remained the default option. Moreover, she said, China would be a priority destination for a joint government and business trade delegation as soon as borders re-open post-COVID.

It was left to Ardern’s mentor, former PM Helen Clark, to make clear what the NZ Labour Party really thinks of Five Eyes. “When I was PM [in 1999-2008], its existence was never openly admitted”, she said. “It was an under-the-radar intelligence-sharing cooperative—and frankly, that is where it should have stayed.” To accede to the USA, UK and Australia’s “expectation of coordination of policy positions”, she said, “would amount to a significant infringement of New Zealand’s sovereignty, and therefore limitation on our independence.”

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 8 September 2021

Footnotes

[1.](#) “Morrison moves to militarise ‘Top End’ for war with China”, AAS, 23 June 2021.

[2.](#) “[Don’t leave Australia’s economic future up to spies!](#)”, AAS, 24 June 2020.

[3.](#) “NZ irritates Five Eyes, makes itself a target”, AAS, 28 Apr. 2021. For an in-depth analysis of the situation in and around Xinjiang, see the AAS special report “[Xinjiang: China’s western frontier in the heart of Eurasia](#)”.