

New Zealand calls for “constructive dialogue” on Chinese air defence zone

By Tom Peters
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New Zealand’s conservative National Party government has sought to avoid taking sides in the tense standoff over Beijing’s air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, which was announced on November 23. The zone includes the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are in dispute between China and Japan.

The government’s muted response and the silence of the opposition parties—the Labour Party, Greens and Mana Party—reflects the deep dilemma facing the New Zealand ruling class as it seeks to balance between its chief trading partner, China, and longstanding strategic ally, the United States.

The Obama administration seized on the ADIZ to strengthen ties with its allies Japan and South Korea, as part of its “pivot” to Asia, aimed at encircling China and undermining Beijing’s influence throughout the region. During a visit to Tokyo on Wednesday, US Vice-President Joe Biden reaffirmed that the US would side with Japan in any conflict with China. Tokyo, Seoul and Washington have recklessly ratcheted up tensions with China by stating that they will ignore the ADIZ and by repeatedly flying military aircraft into the zone. In response, the Chinese government has boosted air patrols and scrambled fighter jets.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key told Fairfax Media on November 28 that he would not take sides in the dispute. He said Wellington had “discussed the matter both with the Japanese and with the Chinese and we have given them both the same message,” calling for “constructive dialogue.”

Asked by the *New Zealand Herald* whether China’s ADIZ or the unnotified flights by Japan, the US and South Korea were responsible for escalating tensions, Foreign Minister Murray McCully refused to criticise any country. “We would simply say that anything that

lifts the level of tension is unhelpful,” he stated.

The Key government’s cautious response stands in marked contrast to the Australian government, whose foreign minister, Julie Bishop, criticised the “sudden announcement” of the zone as a “coercive and unilateral” measure, provoking a sharp rebuke from China. The present coalition government in Canberra, like the previous Labor government, has fully lined up with Washington’s “pivot.”

Wellington wants to avoid antagonising China, which earlier this year overtook Australia as New Zealand’s biggest trading partner. At the same time, like all US allies in the Asia-Pacific, NZ is under increasing pressure to unconditionally align itself with Washington against Beijing. There are growing signs of nervousness in ruling circles over this precarious balancing act.

On November 28, Robert Ayson from New Zealand’s Centre for Strategic Studies branded China’s ADIZ as “bad for regional peace and order.” At the same time, he criticised Canberra for “buying in even further into the rising prospects of an armed conflict between China and Japan” by publicly siding with Japan. Writing in the *Dominion Post* in October, Ayson declared that Australia’s support for Japan “cut across New Zealand’s interests in maintaining good and flexible relations” with China.

Liam Dann, the *New Zealand Herald*’s business editor, in a column on Monday entitled “China v USA—NZ’s dilemma” wrote that New Zealand faced an “extremely difficult diplomatic position,” amid a “geo-political minefield.” While dismissing suggestions that “we’re headed for World War III,” he declared that if New Zealand gained a UN Security Council seat, “we really will be hoping that nothing develops during the next two years that requires us to

pick a side.”

The government’s position, echoed in the media, that it does not need to “pick a side” is contradicted by the fact that, as a minor imperialist power in the South West Pacific, New Zealand is under pressure from Washington to do just that.

Last month, New Zealand hosted its biggest-ever international military exercise, Operation Southern Katipo, which included forces from the US, Australia, Britain and Canada. This followed a visit by Defence Minister Jonathon Coleman to Washington in October, where he told US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel that NZ welcomed “the US rebalance to our part of the world.” (See: “New Zealand-US military exercise rehearses for Pacific war”).

New Zealand’s military and intelligence ties with the US soured in the 1980s when the Lange Labour government prevented potentially nuclear-armed warships from visiting New Zealand. Later, the Clark Labour government ended that standoff and committed New Zealand troops to the US-led neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

NZ’s spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau, is part of the “Five Eyes” intelligence-sharing network that includes the US, Australia, Canada and Britain. Whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed that the GCSB’s Waihopi spy base is part of the US National Security Agency’s worldwide X-Keyscore operation, which gathers massive amounts of electronic data from millions of ordinary people in the US and around the world.

While the current National government has tried to avoid appearing to take sides, the Labour Party, the Greens and Mana, together with the pseudo-left organisations, have joined with the chauvinist New Zealand First Party in a racist campaign to denounce Chinese investment in a handful of farms. Last month, New Zealand First Party leader Winston Peters delivered a speech at Victoria University’s Institute of International Affairs depicting China’s rise as a threat to the Asia-Pacific. “If developments in China are not as rosy as most commentary currently suggests, the effects will be felt most immediately throughout North and Southeast Asia before affecting us all,” he said.

Whatever their tactical differences, the entire political establishment supports New Zealand’s military alliance with the US and Australia. The general silence

surrounding the sharp tensions in the East China Sea is part of a broader media blackout on the US military build-up in Asia against China and New Zealand’s integration into the US war plans. For instance, despite its unprecedented scale, Operation Southern Katipo received scant media coverage. Every effort is being made to chloroform workers and youth as to the great dangers of a slide into war that would engulf the region and spread internationally, and so block the emergence of an independent anti-war movement of the working class.

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