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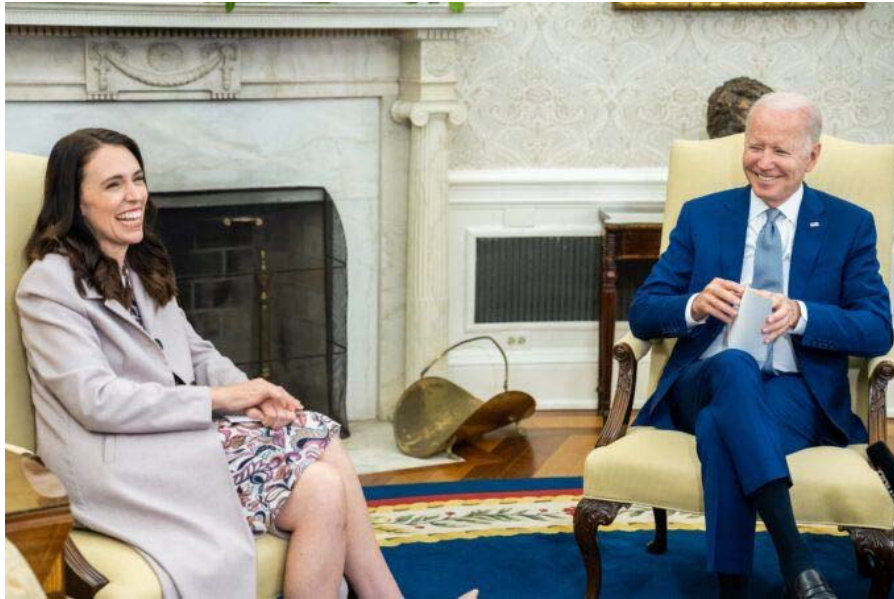
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BY DANIEL FALCONE

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The Challenges of New Zealand and Progressive Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World



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New Zealand (led by Chris Hipkins and formerly Jacinda Ardern) has downplayed the implications of its *involvement with AUKUS*. The government has also drawn close to the US strategy of militarily containing *China*.

In this interview, Malcolm McKinnon a senior academic and historian of New Zealand discusses the country's foreign policy presence. He is the author of a number of works on New Zealand's international relations including *Independence and Foreign Policy: New*

Zealand in the World Since 1935 (Auckland University Press) as well as *New Zealand and ASEAN: a History*. He frequently contributes opinion pieces on New Zealand foreign policy.

McKinnon covers the role New Zealand plays internationally and explains how its geostrategic partnership is presented in the mainstream press. Further, he discusses the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on the nation's policy as well as how the country fits in with American and Chinese diplomacy. McKinnon makes an argument explaining why New Zealand's nuanced approach to world affairs is conducive to a more progressive foreign policy as well as provides a critique of the government that downplays the implications for its involvement with western power.

Daniel Falcone: Could you briefly explain the role New Zealand plays internationally in current affairs? How would you characterize New Zealand foreign policy?

Malcolm McKinnon: New Zealand, also referred to as Aotearoa, the Māori language name for the country, is a mid-sized state (ranked 121/194 of United Nations members by population) in a relatively isolated part of the world.

Its foreign policy has been shaped since the 1940s by opposition to the use of force in international relations – ‘collective security’ – buttressed by a strong preference for multilateral and diplomatic solutions to global problems (in International Relations terms, a liberal internationalist rather than a realist stance, as befits a state which deploys very limited hard power)

Since the 1970s the country's foreign policy has also been shaped by the imperatives of being a global trader, including the need to maintain diplomatic ties with a variety of states, with many of which New Zealand is out of sympathy politically. Further, New Zealand's support for US-led alliances has been qualified by the goal of limiting or ending the place of nuclear weapons in the defence and security policies of all states.

Daniel Falcone: Does Māori identity influence the country's foreign policy?

Malcolm McKinnon: The present Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Nanaia Mahuta is from New Zealand's indigenous Māori population (as was her immediate predecessor, the Rt. Hon. Winston Peters).

Indigeneity has been significant for New Zealand's relations with other South Pacific states, for example Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu. On a visit to Vanuatu in March 2023, the two countries agreed on a Mauri Statement of Partnership, which Mahuta described as a ‘joint expression of the values, priorities and principles that will guide the Aotearoa New Zealand–Vanuatu relationship into the future. “Mauri” is a word that denotes life-force in te reo Māori

and in several ni-Vanuatu languages. This is an apt reflection of the living, growing, and enduring partnership between Aotearoa New Zealand and Vanuatu.’

Te Pāti Māori, which has two seats in the current Parliament, has linked indigenous rights to international relations in its call for a neutral defence and foreign policy. Both Te Pāti Māori and the Green Party support full implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Aotearoa, although this has been politically controversial.

Daniel Falcone: Between the United States, and other geo-strategic countries, New Zealand politics usually receives tertiary coverage in the West. Where are the best places to go to receive accurate perspectives of the region?

Malcolm McKinnon: The low level of coverage is not at all surprising given New Zealand’s size, uncontroversial politics, and distance from crisis zones. For detailed coverage of New Zealand politics, the democracy project’s NZ politics daily is unrivalled. Of major overseas media outlets with a progressive orientation, the UK’s Guardian has probably the most thorough coverage of New Zealand and the region. For analysis of New Zealand’s foreign relations, the bimonthly journal of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, New Zealand International Review, which started publication in 1976, is indispensable. The more recent Incline, hosted at Victoria University’s Centre for Strategic Studies, is also valuable. For the region as a whole La Trobe Asia is a good place to start.

Daniel Falcone: Can you comment on how New Zealand has emerged as a relevant member of the international community considering the Russo-Ukrainian war?

Malcolm McKinnon: In its region New Zealand has aligned with Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Australia in taking strong measures against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine, including sanctions imposed on both trade and on specific Russian individuals, and contributions to training Ukrainian forces. One expert commentator has pointed out that New Zealand has been more a follower than a leader in such matters but arguably its very remoteness from the theatre of war enhances the significance of the steps it has taken, which have been adopted by relatively few countries in parts of the world distant from the conflict. New Zealand’s stance is embedded in the country’s commitment to the principles of the UN Charter, including opposition to the ‘scourge of war’ and to acts of aggression.

Daniel Falcone: What is the relationship between China and New Zealand and what kind of impact does it have on US policy?

Malcolm McKinnon: New Zealand has a strong economic relationship with China – China has been New Zealand’s largest trading partner since 2017. Moreover, other countries in the region – Australia, South Korea, Japan, Singapore – with which New Zealand has strong

economic ties, also have extensive trade and financial ties with China. Immigration in the last 30 years or so has also made for a large Chinese-origin population in New Zealand, especially in its major city, Auckland.

The economic relationship contrasts with major concerns New Zealand governments and many New Zealand citizens have over human rights issues in China and China's conduct in its oceanic neighbourhood, especially the East and South China Seas. In recent years the human rights concerns have focused most on the treatment of the Uyghur and Tibetan populations in the PRC, the fate of Hong Kong, and the possibility of forceful unification of Taiwan with the mainland.

Since the United States labelled China a strategic competitor in 2017 these apprehensions have been reinforced by concerns about China's regional and global ambitions. Those concerns are especially marked in the defence and policy communities in the capital city, Wellington. On the other hand, commercial and financial interests based in the business capital, Auckland, wish to protect economic relations with China and oppose decoupling and/or vocal expression of human rights concerns.

Daniel Falcone: New Zealand provides hope maybe for other citizens and countries of the world that seek progressive measures and implementations from the top down. How can the country's policies further help establish the efforts of the organized left?

Malcolm McKinnon: New Zealand is committed to promoting democracy, human rights, and good governance, especially in its neighborhood, although it mostly does so under the radar. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the principal funder of Union Aid, which does terrific 'on the ground' work in Southeast and South Asia. In 2020 New Zealand started Tai-a-Kiwa, a program that seeks to strengthen Parliaments in South Pacific countries. Some of the work of the Asia New Zealand Foundation also bears on such matters, but with a very light touch, as befits regional sensitivities. Former Prime Minister Ardern's commitment to tolerance, moderation and principle in political life resonated with many New Zealanders, as it still does in progressive circles around the world.

There are several areas where the consensus in New Zealand around progressive stances is strong. I'd single out three:

- 1) Indigenous rights – in large part owing to the political skill and influence of the Māori political class, indigenous rights have a much greater standing and impact in New Zealand than in Australia, Canada, the US, or Latin America.
- 2) Disarmament – although New Zealand's 'anti-nuclear' policy has a strong 'NIMBY' element, it has fostered a commitment to global disarmament which has been a consistent

part of New Zealand diplomacy for a generation and which also informs commitments to climate change action, particularly in respect of support for New Zealand's South Pacific neighbors.

3) China – Australian scholar of China David Brophy has argued that in both Australia and the US, the debate around China has been so securitised that it is difficult to introduce other elements into analysis of relations with the PRC without being accused of being 'soft'. As with many of China's neighbors, the debate in New Zealand remains nuanced, if at times difficult.

All three stances arise from New Zealand circumstances that cannot readily be replicated in other countries, especially not in large and heterogeneous ones: New Zealand has a single indigenous population (if many tribal groupings) with one language and a shared culture, and it accounts for 15% of the total population (comparable with Alaska or Hawai'i but not the US as a whole). New Zealand has a legacy of anti-militarism from the 1980s. And it has a less influential defence and security lobby compared with the US and Australia. Nonetheless, the very existence of such circumstances can hearten progressives in other countries, even if the challenges they face are greater.

Daniel Falcone: What concerns do you have regarding the country's foreign policy? How might individuals or groups concerned with progressive policy address or critique New Zealand governance? Could you elaborate on (AUKUS) the trilateral security pact of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States in terms of New Zealand's relevancy?

Malcolm McKinnon: The government has downplayed the implications for New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy of any involvement with AUKUS. The government has drawn close to the US strategy of militarily containing China. Identified as a NATO partner, it has by inference associated itself with NATO's 2022 definition of China as a state whose 'stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values'. A recent address by NZ navy head Rear-Admiral David Proctor at Honolulu was ideological and explicitly hostile to China's conduct in the region. While in some settings the government has reiterated the importance of the relationship with China, it has said little about the value of other strategies for managing conflict in the region, such as have been voiced by Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong.

Activists can connect however, with CAFCA, Te Kuaka, and Werewolf, all voices for a progressive foreign policy and all articulate in framing critiques of the directions discussed immediately above.. A newly-formed group, the anti-AUKUS coalition, demonstrated outside Parliament in Wellington in mid-April.

Daniel Falcone is a teacher, journalist, and PhD student in the World History program at St. John's University in Jamaica, NY as well as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. He resides in New York City.

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