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Prime Minister

We are deeply concerned about the direction of New Zealand’s foreign policy.

Our country has for many years enjoyed a cordial relationship with both the United States and China. Both countries were comfortable with that in the past.

But more recently, the United States has described China not only as a competitor, but also as an adversary, and has been putting pressure on other countries to take sides.

All of us have admired American democracy and technological leadership, and we value the contribution which the United States has made to trade and development in the Asia Pacific. Unfortunately the attributes we have admired are also now under strain.

While good relations with the United States must be maintained, we see considerable disadvantage to New Zealand in becoming part of defence arrangements, including the associated prospective AUKUS Pillar Two, which are explicitly aimed at China.

In recent months, you and Foreign Minister Peters have made a number of statements which we consider to be positioning New Zealand alongside the United States as an adversary of China. For example, since coming to office, your government has signed New Zealand up to a number of strategic groupings¹ led by the United States. You have authorised a naval vessel to sail through the Taiwan Strait, despite knowing that would antagonise China. You have strengthened defence ties with the Philippines at a time when it is in a low-level military stand-off with China in the South China Sea. You have allowed one of your MPs, both last year and again recently, to lead a large delegation of MPs to Taiwan, despite many years of avoiding such a scale of political contacts (given that for more than half a century we have acknowledged that Taiwan is part of China) and knowing that the visit would cause offence.

Most recently², Foreign Minister Peters has poured scorn on the New Zealand-China FTA, which through bipartisan efforts has become a bedrock of New Zealand’s modern economic security.

It would not be surprising if China were to come to the conclusion that the special relationship which New Zealand has had with it since becoming the first developed country to have a free trade agreement with it in 2008 is no longer so valued by New Zealand. Yet China is already by far our largest export market, and is almost certain to become an even more important market as the country continues to develop.

We see no upside and very considerable downside in the situation which has developed.

We are not arguing that we should duplicate, let alone replace, our relationship with the United States by one with China. These two relationships will continue to be very different in nature. That with the US goes back far longer and reflects many more hitherto shared political values.

But we do believe that a military relationship with the United States directed against China has many risks for New Zealand. That is especially true in a situation where the United States itself has recently become more ambivalent about its defence relationships with traditional partners.

Your forthcoming visit to Beijing is a vital opportunity to make it clear at the highest level that New Zealand retains its bipartisan commitment to its strategic partnership with China in the interests of a peaceful and prosperous region and world.

Rt. Hon. Helen Clark
Former Prime Minister and former Administrator of the UN Development Programme

Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey Palmer
Former Prime Minister, former president of the NZ Law Commission

Rt. Hon. Sir David Carter
Former Minister of Agriculture and Speaker of Parliament

Dr Don Brash
Former Governor of Reserve Bank, former Leader of the Opposition Chairman of the NZ subsidiary of a leading Chinese bank

Mr Carl Worker
Former New Zealand ambassador to China

Mr David Mahon
New Zealand businessman resident in Beijing since 1984

¹ Opinion: Helen Clark and Marco de Jong - Subservience puts New Zealand’s sovereignty and security at risk, 3 May 2025, NZ Herald

² Most recently - Winston Peters on China, Cook Islands and why he is ruling out Chris Hipkins ‘permanently’, 27 May 2025, NZ Herald