



PRICED OUT: WHY NEW ZEALAND WILL NOT JOIN AUKUS

By Benjamin Macintyre

Despite initial hopes that New Zealand would align itself with the trilateral strategic partnership between the US, the UK and Australia (AUKUS), New Zealand recently shut down any suggestion that this was a possibility. Whilst this may come as a surprise to New Zealand's traditional allies, the reason for this is simple: New Zealand is too dependent on Chinese trade to risk jeopardising its relationship with the world's 2nd largest economy.



INTRODUCTION

Since its announcement in 2021, AUKUS – the trilateral strategic partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia [1] - has been a contentious issue across the Tasman Sea in New Zealand. Initially, the debate centred on whether Australia's nuclear-powered submarines, slated to be bought from the US in the 2030s, [2] would be allowed to pass through New Zealand's nuclear-free waters. Recently, however, discussion has moved on to whether New Zealand should seek to engage with the AUKUS agreement.

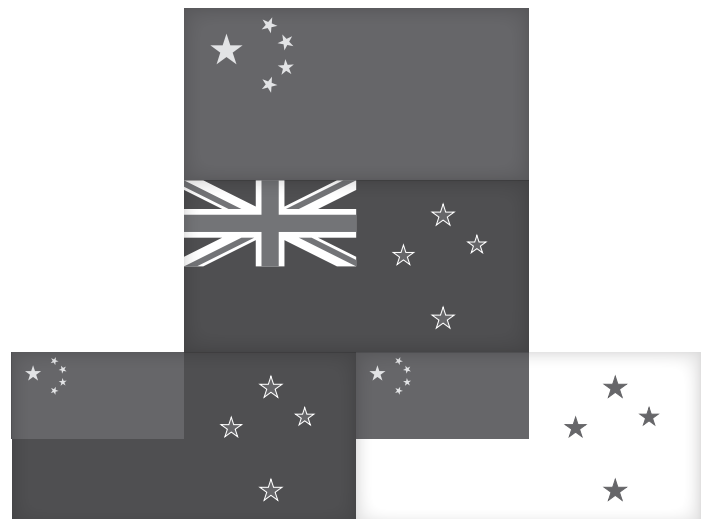
Earlier this year, New Zealand Defence Minister Andrew Little signalled that New Zealand may be open to engaging with AUKUS's non-nuclear second pillar. [3] The Prime Minister, Chris Hipkins, also suggested that New Zealand was open to collaboration with the trilateral security agreement. [4] These positive signs were met with warm encouragement, such as when Anthony Blinken - the US Secretary of State – signalled that the door was “very much open” for future New Zealand participation. [5]

And yet, during Blinken's recent visit to New Zealand, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade -Nanaia Mahuta - shut down any potential future collaboration or membership between New Zealand and AUKUS. [6] This U-turn, after initial soft signalling of an openness to engage, may have come as a surprise for foreign observers of New Zealand foreign policy. Yet, this was much less surprising here in New Zealand. Members of the opposition, [7] as well as former Prime Ministers, [8] had already expressed concerns about the implications of the AUKUS deal for New Zealand. Prior to unequivocally shutting the door, Mahuta had already appeared less open to the idea than her colleagues, stating back in March of

this year that her chief concern was avoiding the militarisation and nuclearization of the Pacific. [9]

Much has already been written about the pros and cons of potential New Zealand engagement with AUKUS. [10, 11] For many, engaging AUKUS would formalise and tighten our connections to our oldest and most traditional allies, allow our defence force access to more advanced technologies, and indirectly consolidate our position as a member of Five-Eyes (where many consider New Zealand to be the weakest link). [12] For others, however, any potential gain New Zealand would get from AUKUS is outweighed by the impact it would have on New Zealand's relations with China – New Zealand's largest trading partner [13] – and New Zealand's self-awarded status as a nation with an independent foreign policy.

Whenever New Zealand does not align itself with its traditional allies, New Zealand officials will often claim that this is due to New Zealand's pursuit of an independent foreign policy driven by New Zealand's values. [14] This is not the case here. It is New Zealand's economic relationship with China that is the deciding factor regarding New Zealand-AUKUS ties. A deeper dive into New Zealand relations with China, and its subsequent dependence on Chinese trade, will thus help uncover why New Zealand will not join AUKUS. This essay shall demonstrate that for as long as New Zealand is disproportionately dependent on Chinese trade it will not push the envelope in a way that may anger China. If current AUKUS members wish to tempt New Zealand away from Chinese dependence and into AUKUS's arms, it must do so not by offering partial membership or certain associated perks, but by enticing New Zealand to shift its trade away from Beijing.



"Maintaining a separation from AUKUS would mean the continuation of warm and disproportionately important trade ties with China" - NZ and its Navy as a colonial entity of China?

I. SINO-NEW ZEALAND RELATIONS: A BRIEF HISTORY

New Zealand's relationship with China has long been different from that of its traditional allies. Firstly, consider that New Zealand has a series of "first fours": New Zealand was the first Western nation to start and conclude a Free-Trade Agreement with China (in 2004 and 2008 respectively), the first to recognise China as a market economy (also in 2004), and the first to agree to China's joining of the World Trade organisation in 1997. [15]

Yet New Zealand's ties with China far pre-date the 1990s. Notwithstanding the Chinese seal hunters which landed on New Zealand shores to gather sealskins for the Chinese market [16] in 1792, official relations between New Zealand and China started with New Zealand's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972 [17] and quickly accelerated from there.

The period of time between New Zealand's official recognition of the People's Republic of China and the present day has seen a rapid, and uneven, coupling of New Zealand's economy with China. Whilst China is currently New Zealand's largest export partner, [18] it was already hugely important in the 1980s, with China becoming New Zealand's largest wool market in 1985 whilst being its 8th largest partner overall. [19] At the turn of the millennium, exports swelled to represent approximately 25% of New Zealand's GDP [20] with China rising to New Zealand's 4th biggest overseas market. [21] In the ten years following the Free-Trade Agreement of 2008, bilateral trade tripled. [22] Skipping forward to the later stages of the last decade, New Zealand became the first developed nation to support new Chinese-led initiatives, namely the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road initiative. [23]

Throughout New Zealand's relationship with China, common themes emerge that bear resemblance to the current state of Sino-Western affairs. Specifically, the perception that New Zealand is more likely to warm up to China than its Western democratic counterparts is not a new one. When Australia and the United States became increasingly critical of the People's Republic of China, amid expectations that it was on the brink of collapse, New Zealand abstained from aligning themselves with its traditional allies and instead maintained a publicly positive relationship with China. [24] This position, borne out of political pragmatism in pursuit of increased trade, [25] has been a point of difference between New Zealand's attitude to China and its Western democratic counterparts.

The reason for this is simple. Whilst Chinese grew exponentially more important for New Zealand's economy, New Zealand's contribution to the Chinese economy did not. In other words, China matters to New Zealand but New Zealand does not matter to China. This has rendered the relationship uneven and explains – at least in part – why New Zealand positions itself differently than



Xi Jinping praises 'great importance' of China-New Zealand 'respectful' relations.



Paper *Holding a Pen in One Hand Gripping a Gun in Another* (July 2020), led to personal attacks by many academics on Professor Anne-Marie Brady, see: <https://rdrr.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-07-HoldingAPenInOneHand-Brady.pdf>

its traditional allies. Current criticisms that New Zealand refuses to stand up for its values when it comes to dealing with China are echoed throughout history: for example in 1999, 2003 and 2007 when the New Zealand government hid or removed anti-China protesters during visits to the country by Chinese officials, sometimes at the Chinese government's request. [26]

For New Zealand, the equation is a simple one: maintain a warm and cordial relationship with the Middle Kingdom, reap the economic rewards. This is the equation that is, and always has been, central to all of New Zealand's dealings with China. While not the only factor, this is the most simple explanation as to why New Zealand has been less likely to criticise China than the United States or Australia. Understanding that this position is not new is the first step to understanding why, for as long as the status quo does not change, New Zealand will not seek to engage itself with AUKUS.

II. THE CURRENT STATE OF SINO-NEW ZEALAND RELATIONS

The impact of decades of political pragmatism in pursuit of Chinese economic engagement has produced an economic relationship upon which New Zealand is overwhelmingly dependent. As of 2021, New Zealand's exports to China were worth 21.45 billion NZD, [27] with a large portion coming from agricultural produce, potentially worth more than the 5% of GDP that exports to China were worth to the New Zealand economy in 2018. [28] China accounts for more than 30% of New Zealand's exports to the world. [29]

The dependence is greater if we examine key industries. For dairy, meat and wood – with each respectively contributing \$18.1 billion, [30] \$10 billion [31] and \$3.8 billion [32] to the New Zealand economy in 2021 – China accounted for 42%, 42% and 65% of their exports. [33] This overreliance not only highlights the current importance of Chinese trade to the New Zealand economy but also the negative impact a downturn in trade would have on New Zealand. The Meat Industry Association estimates that a total loss of the meat industry would lead to doubling of the national unemployment rate, with certain regional unemployment rates pushing above the 50% mark. [34] For an industry so reliant on Chinese trade, a downturn in the latter would presumably have stark negative effects on employment and income for the industry's workers and would disproportionately impact regions in which the meat industry is the main employer.

New Zealand's economic overreliance on Chinese trade naturally informs its foreign policy. Due to this dependence on Chinese trade, New Zealand will seek to maintain a tactical neutrality – if we are to name it generously - as to not incur Chinese wrath. This was evident when Prime Minister Chris Hipkins disagreed with US President Joe Biden on whether or not Xi Jinping is a dictator [35]



PLAN naval training vessel, QI JIGUANG (NTV 83) in Wellington with 500 cadets in October 2019 when Covid had already broken out in China.

or, more egregiously, when the New Zealand Parliament decided not to debate whether the treatment of the Uyghur people constitutes a genocide [36] back in 2020.

It is not entirely true to suggest that New Zealand is never critical of China. Despite refusing to debate whether the human rights abuses of the Uighurs constitute a genocide, New Zealand has referred multiple times to the breach of human rights taking place. [37] The same parliament that refused to call it a genocide unanimously voted to recognise “severe human rights abuses” [38] taking place against the Uyghur people. New Zealand also suspended its extradition treaty with Hong Kong following the imposition of new “national security laws” by mainland China on the island territory [39] and argued against Chinese land reclamations in the South China Sea. [40]

These statements and actions do not compare to New Zealand’s longer history of independent foreign policy. Most famously, and most obviously, New Zealand was not afraid to stand up for what it believed in when it did not allow two US submarines - which had the capability to carry nuclear weapons - into New Zealand waters on the basis that New Zealand is nuclear-free. This action cost New Zealand its status as an official United States ally [41] and led to the de-facto annulling of the ANZUS agreement. [42] Yet, despite these harsh consequences, New Zealand did not falter and this remains a great source of pride for New Zealanders to this day.

Whilst New Zealand was willing to cross the line into harsh consequences with the US then, it does not seem to be willing to do the same with China now. The reason should be obvious. Whilst angering the United States had some immediate and difficult consequences, it ultimately had a minimal impact on the New Zealand economy. [43] The same would not be true if the relationship between China and New Zealand turns sour. New Zealand may continue to make symbolic statements against Chinese actions when these contravene New Zealand’s values and are considered unlikely to anger China enough to sever economic ties. When the potential economic risk is too great, however, do not expect New Zealand to cross that line.

III. WHY AUKUS ISN’T WORTH THE PRICE

It isn’t as if official affiliation with AUKUS wouldn’t have benefits for New Zealand. Signing on to the agreement would tighten New Zealand’s alliances with the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. [44] It is true that the Pacific is becoming a hotbed for great powers to project their influence, [45] which is something China is trying to do as highlighted by its alliance with the Solomon Islands. [46] Alignment with New Zealand’s traditional allies would reinforce New Zealand’s role to play in the region whilst restricting the breadth of China’s ambition.

Affiliation with AUKUS would also be beneficial for New Zealand’s defensive capabilities, with much already being said about how into would improve interoperability between New Zealand and its traditional allies [47] and allow the New Zealand Defence Force access to better technologies than it currently does. [48] Affiliation with AUKUS may also indirectly benefit the Five Eyes alliance (the intelligence sharing alliance between the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada [49]) where New Zealand is currently widely considered to be the weakest link. [50]

It is clear that the AUKUS members want New Zealand to align itself with the trilateral agreement, whether officially or otherwise. The idea of a united Anglophone front as a deterrent to Chinese expansion into the Pacific is an obvious incentive to pull New Zealand under the AUKUS umbrella. Beyond this, the aforementioned interoperability of the New Zealand Defence Force is of particular interest to Australia and for the trans-Tasman security relationship going forward. [51]

These are the advantages to be gleaned from an official alignment with AUKUS for New Zealand. And yet, from a New Zealand perspective, the price of admission is too high. For New Zealand, joining AUKUS essentially comes with the price tag of lost revenue from Chinese trade, as China sees trade as political [52] and would burden New Zealand exports with tariffs and other such measures should New Zealand fall foul of Beijing’s favour. Membership, or formal alliance, with AUKUS simply isn’t worth this price.

If current AUKUS members are serious about future New Zealand alignment with the trilateral agreement, then they must offer not defensive or foreign policy assurances but rather a viable alternative for New Zealand trade. For example, current American dairy tariffs are a major barrier for prospective New Zealand exports. A complicated quota system only allows certain dairy products to be sold, with various tariffs adding additional roadblocks [53] (Once the quota for butter is met, for example, 12.8% of its export profits are tariffed). [54] Meanwhile, over 98% of New Zealand exports to China are not tariffed [55] with the tariffs that currently remain on dairy being removed in January 2024. [56] This is merely one example – but it demonstrates that if AUKUS wants New Zealand involvement, then it must lure New Zealand not with defensive or foreign policy incentives but with economic ones.

Trade and foreign policy are inseparably interlinked for New Zealand. The path for prospective New Zealand affiliation with AUKUS is a long one. But it not unclear: more must be done to make New Zealand less dependent on Chinese trade. Then, if New Zealand has successfully reduced its dependence on China and is exporting to a wider set of countries – ideally its traditional allies – then New Zealand may be more willing to risk Chinese anger. In other words: If you want New Zealand to line up with AUKUS, then you have to bring the price of doing so down first.



PLAN Intelligence Ship YUHENGXING (CSI 798) in New Zealand Economic Zone, November 2021.

CONCLUSION

New Zealand stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, official affiliation with AUKUS would tighten and reinvigorate its traditional alliances and allow its Defence Force access to technologies it would not otherwise have access to. It would also indirectly dispel fears that it is the weakest member of the Five Eyes Alliance. On the other hand, maintaining a separation from AUKUS would mean the continuation of warm – and disproportionately important – trade ties with the 2nd biggest economy in the world (by nominal GDP). [57]

And yet, as things stand, the path New Zealand will choose is clear. The sheer importance of Chinese trade to the New Zealand economy draws a line in the sand which New Zealand will not cross for fear of economic retribution. If New Zealand is to align itself with AUKUS one day, that line must be redrawn. Making the New Zealand economy less dependent on Chinese trade is the first step, and one that current AUKUS members can help with. ■

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