

STRENGTHENING NEW ZEALAND'S COMMITMENT TO AN INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY

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New Zealand's bi-partisan commitment to an independent, rules-based foreign policy clashes in practice with close participation in the Five Eyes alliance. Changes are needed to align military, intelligence and diplomatic activities with the overarching goal of an independent foreign policy.

Key findings

- There is a disconnect between New Zealand's declared position as a independent and principled small nation, and various alliance-oriented activities of the military, intelligence agencies and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- New Zealand's historic position in a five-nation, Anglo-American military and intelligence alliance (Five Eyes) has a strong influence over New Zealand actions and policy, often to the detriment of an independent foreign policy.
- The election of the Trump Administration provides a good time for New Zealand to rethink how closely it wants be aligned to the Five Eyes nations and to take steps to strengthen the independent foreign policy.

Executive summary

New Zealand is in the midst of a historic process of developing an independent foreign policy. Sixty years ago, New Zealand was still closely tied to Britain, a natural consequence of its colonial past. Thirty years ago, there was a growing self-perception of New Zealand as a principled and independent small nation; a nation that could have disproportionate influence internationally through its independent voice and being an impartial peace keeping nation. Public support for and identification with the role of principled and independent small nation continues to grow.

At the same time, New Zealand has extensive intelligence, military and foreign affairs involvement in a five nation Anglo-American alliance led by the United States. As the smallest member, New Zealand has a limited influence over the alliance priorities and plans. But the alliance has a massive influence over the day to day activities of New Zealand government organisations. Many Five Eyes alliance activities are undertaken with little or no public knowledge and consent. The incompatibility of the independent and alliance orientations has led to incoherence and inconsistency in policy.



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This policy contradiction needs to be addressed.

The Five Eyes alliance is premised on the idea that the nations are “like minded” and have “shared values”. In some respects this is correct. But as a small nation, committed to international law and institutions, New Zealand has a fundamentally different approach to international relations than big military powers. There are non-Five Eyes countries with which New Zealand is more like minded and has more closely shares values. New Zealand's economic interests also do not always align with the Five Eyes nations.

New Zealand's commitment to an independent foreign policy therefore requires a different approach to alliance membership than New Zealand has had in the past. This policy brief proposes a set of explicit “bottom lines” to guide New Zealand's future contributions to the Anglo-American allies.

Why does this matter to New Zealand?

In 2012-14, during international lobbying to win a seat on the UN security council, New Zealand diplomats promoted New Zealand as a country that was independent, nuclear free and a staunch supporter of a principled and rules-based international system. The diplomats understood that being seen as an independent country earned more respect and support than being seen as a proxy in international affairs for the US and Britain. However the picture they promoted of New Zealand was only partly true, highlighting the contradiction in the country's foreign policy.

New Zealand's “traditional” foreign policy structures and alliances date from the years following the Second World War. The country's WWII intelligence cooperation was reconfigured into Cold War agreements in the late 1940s. New Zealand joined the ANZUS alliance in 1951. British officers came to New Zealand to oversee establishment of a signals intelligence agency (later the Government Communications Security Bureau) in 1955 and the Security Intelligence Service in 1956. Five-nation military links such as the ABCA armies coordination agreement were formalised in the 1960s. The intelligence agencies, military and, to a lesser extent, foreign affairs ministry have been strongly embedded in an Anglo-American alliance structure since.

There are, however, other strong and more modern currents in New Zealand's international relations. By the 1970s public opinion had swung strongly against New Zealand's participation in the Vietnam War and the 1972-75 Labour Government opposed French nuclear weapon testing. Prime Minister Norman Kirk promoted New Zealand as an independent small nation that was willing to speak up internationally on issues of principle. Peacekeeping would become a major activity of the defence forces.

In the 1980s, under Prime Minister David Lange, New Zealand established the nuclear free policy and was, as punishment for this, expelled from the ANZUS alliance. An important 1990s parliamentary review called Defence Beyond 2000 recommended restructuring the New Zealand military for regional and peacekeeping roles ahead of traditional alliance roles. Throughout these years the concept that New Zealand should have an independent foreign policy came to be widely accepted by the public and in government.

Today both National and Labour-led governments routinely declare their commitment to an independent foreign policy. But the reality is more contradictory: trying at the same time to have an independent foreign policy and to maintain extremely close alliance relations with the US and other



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Five Eyes nations. This situation has been strained further during the last decade by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the New Zealand Defence Force working to integrate New Zealand more closely with the US military.

New Zealand is the least influential ally in the Five Eyes alliance, which reduces its ability to act independently. Independence implies that a country makes its own decisions according to its own values and priorities. But, as the earlier ANZUS membership showed, that is not the reality of junior ally status. The expectation of Five Eyes membership is that New Zealand will mostly conform with the allies and join their operations.

For the military, Five Eyes membership results in its equipment, training, doctrine and planning being determined primarily by the requirement to be interoperable with US-led coalition activities and by an assumption of willingness to be part of US and British-led wars. Since 2001 this has included a shift of priority from the Pacific to the Middle East and central Asia, joining wars that have destabilised those regions and beyond.

The intelligence agencies operate with less public oversight than the military and so have been less affected by the generational shift to a more independent foreign policy. Many intelligence activities closely follow the Five Eyes allies. This was demonstrated for the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) by the Edward Snowden revelations.

For instance, an April 2013 US National Security Agency report called "NSA Intelligence Relationship with New Zealand" included a section called "What Partner [GCSB] Provides to NSA". It said the GCSB "continues to be especially helpful in its ability to provide NSA ready access to areas and countries... difficult for the US to access..." It said "GCSB provides collection on China, Japanese/North Korea/Vietnamese/South American diplomatic communications, South Pacific island communications, Pakistan, India, Iran and Antarctica." Other documents showed GCSB intelligence activities in Afghanistan, a joint NSA-GCSB operation against the Chinese consulate in Auckland and operations against Bangladesh and the United Nations.

Most of these surveillance operations bore little relationship to New Zealand's overt foreign policies. The targeting of South Pacific governments, for instance, was the result of a decades-old dividing up of the globe between the Five Eyes nations into surveillance responsibilities and was inconsistent with New Zealand's modern relations with these countries.

Some New Zealand officials argue internally that the work of the GCSB can be seen, in effect, as a tithe New Zealand pays for membership of the Five Eyes alliance. As such, the argument goes, fulfilling alliance obligations can be a rational choice by New Zealand and thus part of an independent foreign policy. The "tithe" argument does not face up to the contradictions of targeting mostly friendly, non-threatening governments, important trading partners and the United Nations, for which New Zealand publicly declares its full support. Unlike large powers, New Zealand's interests are better served by attempting to maintain friendly relations with all nations (including for instance, both the US and China), with an approach of being even handed and non-aggressive.



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What should New Zealand do?

The best way to ensure alliance activities are in accord with an independent foreign policy is to define some clear limits to New Zealand's participation in the US-led alliance. This is necessary to ensure that the pressure of alliance expectations (which largely occurs beyond public and parliamentary view) does not trump the wish for a democratically determined, independent foreign policy.

The conditions placed on alliance membership should be based on several factors. The first is that New Zealand needs a more realistic assessment of how different the country is in values, outlook and interests from militarised big powers like the US and Britain. The second is recognition that the New Zealand military, intelligence agencies and diplomatic staff are very small compared to larger powers. Choices about priorities need to be made. The third is recognition that the "tithe" mentality can lead, incrementally, to each and every alliance activity being seen as in New Zealand's interests. That is why New Zealand priorities and bottom lines need to be identified first.

Some "bottom lines" of New Zealand Five Eyes cooperation should be:

- * No New Zealand military and intelligence operations in the Middle East and Central Asia
- * No signals New Zealand intelligence operations against South Pacific nations, the United Nations, South Pacific regional organisations and friendly governments.

This is not an exhaustive list but would be important practically and symbolically. It would send a necessary signal that alliance contributions should be consistent with an independent assessment of New Zealand values, diverse international relationships and commitment to human rights and the rule of law

Conclusion

New Zealand has been running an increasingly incoherent foreign policy that fails to reconcile the differences between an independent foreign policy and staunch membership of the US-led Five Eyes alliance. These two tracks represent an older colonial-era orientation and a more modern orientation. This policy brief proposes that New Zealand recognise this clash of influences and take steps to strengthen the country's bipartisan aspiration to have an independent foreign policy.

An underlying question is whether, as alliance supporters assert, New Zealand and the other Five Eyes nations are like minded and have shared values. A confident and independent approach is to recognise this is partly correct and in many ways not correct. Foreign policy, including military and intelligence activities, are arguably some of the areas where the countries are less like minded and less guided by shared values.

The differences are more evident at some times than others. The election of President Trump has highlighted the differences and the risks of being too closely aligned, making this a sensible time to take steps to strengthen New Zealand's independent foreign policy.



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