

New Zealand says it will set China policy, not US-led Five Eyes

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News

The foreign minister also says New Zealand is ‘uncomfortable’ with expanding the remit of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing group.



Nanaia Mahuta told the government-funded New Zealand China Council that Wellington wanted to chart its own course in dealings with China [File: Dave Lintott/AFP]

New Zealand will not let the United States-led Five Eyes alliance dictate its dealings with China, the Pacific nation’s foreign minister said on Monday, adding that Wellington is “uncomfortable” with expanding the remit of the intelligence grouping, which also includes the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

Nanaia Mahuta’s comments came as tensions between the US, its allies and China soar amid differences on a range of issues, including trade, technology and Beijing’s actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.

China is New Zealand’s largest trading partner, and Mahuta told the government-funded New Zealand China Council that Wellington wanted to chart its own course in dealings with China.

“New Zealand has been very clear ... not to invoke the Five Eyes as the first point of contact on messaging out on a range of issues,” she said.

“We don’t favour that type of approach and have expressed that to Five Eyes partners.”

China’s foreign ministry has repeatedly criticised the Five Eyes alliance after all members issued a joint statement about the treatment of Hong Kong pro-democracy legislators in November.



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Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying also accused the Five Eyes last month of taking “coordinated steps to gang up on China” after Australia and New Zealand issued a joint statement condemning Beijing’s treatment of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang.

In the statement, Canberra and Wellington also welcomed sanctions imposed by other Western nations on Chinese officials over the alleged abuses in Xinjiang.

Mahuta said on Monday that Wellington would not ignore Beijing’s actions if they conflicted with its commitment to universal human rights, but said the Five Eyes grouping must not stray from its scope of intelligence-sharing between member nations.

“We are uncomfortable with expanding the remit of the Five Eyes relationship,” she said. “We would much rather prefer to look for multilateral opportunities to express our interests on a number of issues.”

Mahuta’s comments indicate a growing divide on Beijing between New Zealand and partners like Australia and come just days before a planned meeting with her Australian counterpart Marise Payne.

According to Australia’s ABC broadcaster, tensions have flared between Canberra and Wellington on how to handle Beijing, “although most of the frustrations have been kept behind closed doors”.



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ABC said the Australian government believes New Zealand “is undermining collective attempts to push back against increasingly aggressive behaviour from Beijing”.

Australia has recently endured a rockier relationship with China than New Zealand, with its trade minister unable to secure a call with his Chinese counterpart as Beijing imposed trade sanctions on Australian imports, including on wine and barley.

The punitive measures came after Canberra lobbied for an international inquiry into the source of the coronavirus pandemic, which originated in China, and also stepped up criticism of Beijing’s crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

In contrast, China and New Zealand upgraded a free trade agreement in January and New Zealand’s Trade Minister Damien O’Connor suggested that if the Australian government “were to follow us and show respect ... they too could hopefully be in a similar situation” with Beijing.

Mahuta, in remarks to the media after her speech on Monday, said Beijing and Wellington agreed their relationship was in “good shape”, but stressed that New Zealand needed to reduce its trade exposure to China.

“Resting our trade relationship with just one country, long term, is probably not the way we should be thinking about things,” she said.

“But it’s an ‘and-and’, it’s not about China or the rest, it’s about China and others.”

Source: Al Jazeera and news agencies