

# New Zealand pushes aside Five Eyes to pursue closer ties with China

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By Robert Mendick,



New Zealand has broken with its “Five Eyes” intelligence partners, including the UK, as it pursues a closer alliance with China, its largest trading partner.

New Zealand’s foreign minister said she would not allow the intelligence alliance to dictate the country’s dealings with China, putting it at odds with the other members of the ‘Five Eyes’ alliance: the UK, US, Canada and Australia.

Tensions between Beijing and Washington have been rising in recent years, while in March Britain and China imposed tit-for-tat sanctions stemming from human rights abuses committed against Uyghur Muslims. Australia’s robust criticism of China’s human rights record in recent months has resulted in punitive levies on more than a dozen Australian exports, including wine.

Intelligence sources in the UK insisted they were not concerned by comments made by Nanaia Mahuta, who was appointed New Zealand’s foreign minister following Jacinda Ardern’s re-election last year. Sources suggested there was a difference of opinion on a specific issue over the issuing of joint statements on China but stressed this was not “a fracturing of the relationship” of the Five Eyes alliance.

The Five Eyes network, which was established during the Cold War as a means for the five countries to collect and share intelligence, expanded its role last year to include the promotion of “shared values” on democracy and human rights. That included issuing a statement criticising China’s suppression of protests in Hong Kong.

New Zealand’s attempts to now distance itself from the Five Eyes alliance will inevitably open up Ms Ardern to allegations that her administration is ignoring abuses in Hong Kong and against Uyghur Muslims in order to preserve and grow its trading relationship with China. Recent figures show 29 per cent of New Zealand’s exports are sold to China.

In her speech to the New Zealand China Council, Ms Mahuta said Five Eyes should 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.”

New Zealand had previously been reluctant to sign joint statements from Five Eyes partners criticising China, including on the crackdown on Hong Kong’s democracy movement and the recent arrests of activists in the city.

Officials in New Zealand have not previously addressed the issue but Ms Mahuta said Wellington wanted to chart its own course in dealings with China.

She said: “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. We’ve not favoured that type of approach and have expressed that to Five Eyes partners.”

Ms Mahuta, 50, described the China-New Zealand relationship as one between a “dragon and taniwha”, in reference to a serpent-like creature from Maori myth.

She said: “I see the taniwha and the dragon as symbols of the strength of our particular customs, traditions and values, that aren’t always the same, but need to be maintained and respected. And on that virtue we have together developed the mature relationship we have today.”

The comments come just months after New Zealand’s trade minister urged Australia to show more “respect” to Beijing.

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