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New Zealand: Weak Link or Clever Player?

By David Howell

Has New Zealand fallen under Chinese influence? – Japan Times 28.04.21 The question sounds absurd until one reads and checks successive utterances from New Zealand ministers in recent months, culminating in the quite open statements from Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta that the island country is going cool on its membership in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance that counters Chinese moves in Asia and around the world. And Mahuta said that is because New Zealanders are no longer “comfortable” with this long-standing alliance and the pitch of its antiChinese statements.

At first sight this seems strange. The Five Eyes alliance, consisting of the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, has long been known for its more subtle and balanced efforts in addressing Chinese power while maintaining a fair and equitable relationship with the rising world giant. Both India and Japan have indicated an interest in being more involved. The focus has always been sensibly on containment, as well as cooperation, and on the most sensitive area where future provocations and misunderstandings could most easily escalate into outright warfare — namely, cyberspace and remote but destabilizing interventions of novel kinds deep into other countries’ affairs.

In fairness to New Zealand, this intelligence alliance seems to have been metamorphosing into something more aggressive in recent times. This presents many countries, not just New Zealand, with an increasingly tricky dilemma.

For example, there is Xi Jinping’s China, with its heavy-handed bullying of Hong Kong, its secretive and shifty stance on the treatment of Uyghers, its almost childish possessive attitude (“keep out — it’s mine”) in regards to the South China Sea region — an obvious international waterway — and a lot more. Sabre rattling over Taiwan also adds to the tension.

All this has been accompanied by a distinctly threatening tone against countries and institutions that are deemed to have been too critical of modern China’s ways and demands. Beijing’s apparent blessing of the child-shooting military junta in Myanmar seems a particularly crass act as well.

If this is the great “Chinese Dream,” then it is badly in need of revision.

Yet this is the same China that is seeking to cooperate in the battle against climate change, bringing investments, new technologies and massive new infrastructure projects to many countries in need. It has also become — in just a few decades

— a major engine for world growth, lifting hundreds of millions of its own citizens out of poverty.

In New Zealand's case specifically, China is one of the country's biggest trading partners (with 29% of its exports), a major source of tourism and a sizable investor. In addition, it is already involved in several key projects in other South Seas communities such as Vanuatu.

But nations of all sizes and in every region face the same sort of dilemma — for instance, in most European nations, including the U.K., China is now a major investor and is deeply involved in several sensitive sectors, such as 5G development, nuclear power and railways. Meanwhile the EU itself signed a trade deal with China only a few weeks ago — a particularly unfortunate piece of timing.

Caribbean island states, Latin America countries and most of Africa have all found themselves increasingly entangled in China's web of influence, sometimes with very costly results. There has been plenty of time to work out a careful, subtle and balanced response to this oncoming predicament, allying all affected parties and states, in all regions, not just the West.

Unfortunately, this is just the response that has been lacking. Instead, a sort of scattergun Sinophobia has emerged, led by Mike Pompeo, Donald Trump's former Secretary of State, U.S. think-tanks and an array of Cold War warriors on both sides of the Atlantic. New Zealand's wobble, or potentially break away, if that is what it is, from this sort of line-up is a sharp warning that the simplistic confrontational approach, dramatically pitting the armies of freedom and democracy against the armies of autocracy and tyranny, belongs to the past.

New Zealand may be small in population, but it is an important link in the chain of response to China — and if one link fails, the chain fails. New Zealand is not only one of the key countries in the Five Eyes intelligence grouping, it is also a key part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership and an important member of the Commonwealth network. And of course, it is tied closely with its big neighbor, Australia.

Policy makers should be looking not at denunciation of everything Chinese, or elaborating on plans (unworkable) to cut China asunder from the world system, but at the best and worst of both Chinese and traditional democratic models in delivering both peace and quality government.

This, and no less, is what, in these unprecedented times of total two-way connectivity, all peoples now demand and expect. This requires a cautious inclination toward convergence rather than confrontation. The democracies may

have key lessons to teach about the absolute necessity for the rule of law, but the Chinese model, with its kind of democracy at the grass roots and meritocracy at the top plainly also delivers.

The overlapping question for both camps is how that meritocracy or technocracy can be held accountable and under the same law for all. The answers in the age of big data, constant connectivity between rulers and ruled, and degrees of transparency unknown ever before in history, will come more from technology than ideology.

The new engagement between the two worlds requires both dialogue and discipline. To get to this point, the West and its friends need to up their game, use super intelligence and all the techniques of modern persuasion and, above all, understand profoundly their rivals and their motives and motivations — a basic and traditional Chinese approach.

Otherwise, while the democracies may win with megaphone diplomacy and in world media channels, the Chinese will win on the ground — and not just in New Zealand.
