

New Zealand: Can an indigenous foreign policy deliver?

Nicholas Ross Smith | 13 December 2022
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Key Issues

- New Zealand's indigenous foreign policy aspires to be a "values-based approach" guided by key Māori principles, such as kindness, connectedness, and shared aspirations.
- New Zealand has made the Pacific the focal point of its indigenous foreign policy, partly in an attempt to rectify previous strategies which were criticised as being colonial and neo-colonial.
- Relations with New Zealand's most important international trade partner, China, have also been re-framed under the indigenous foreign policy concept.
- Like Sweden with its feminist foreign policy, New Zealand will likely struggle to be a consistent indigenous foreign policymaker.

In late 2020, after Jacinda Ardern's victory at the ballot box, New Zealand's appointed its first woman (also the first Māori woman) to the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nanaia Mahuta. While New Zealand had previously had a Māori Minister of Foreign Affairs in Winston Peters (2005-8 & 2017-20), he was someone who downplayed his Māori heritage in his political career for a more secular stance. Mahuta, on the other hand, is a figure who has long embraced her Māori roots, notably displaying a [Moko kauae](#) tattoo on her face.

Mahuta's [inaugural speech](#) as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2021 occurred at Waitangi, the home of the [Treaty of Waitangi](#) and, in her words, "the recognised birthplace of Aotearoa New Zealand". In her speech, Mahuta made plain a desire to bring Māori philosophical concepts to the fore during her tenure, stating that "the principles of partnership and mutual respect

embodied in the Treaty provide the foundation for how New Zealand conducts its foreign policy today."

Mahuta identified four key "tikanga Māori" (Māori customary practices and behaviours) principles which she deemed crucial to underlying the values-based approach she intended to take in directing New Zealand's foreign policy: (1) *manaaki*: kindness or the reciprocity of goodwill; (2) *whanaunga*: our connectedness or shared sense of humanity; (3) *mahi tahi* and *kotahitanga*: collective benefits and shared aspiration; and, (4) *kaitiaki*: protectors and stewards of our intergenerational wellbeing.

Wrapping up, she emphasised that "our lived experience, our values, our deep conviction of what we stand for as a nation means that we will stand for what we believe is in our interest, unafraid to hold our course when the tide turns to navigate towards our destination."

Mahuta's inaugural speech elicited significant media and scholarly coverage and her appointment has been seen by some as the start of a shift in New Zealand adopting a "Māori" or "Indigenous" foreign policy. A prominent Australia-based indigenous scholar, James Blackwell, argued that this represented "foreign policy's 'indigenous moment'". However, although Mahuta's speech signalled the first instance of a New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs openly espousing a Māori foreign policy framework to guide New Zealand's international action, consideration of Māori interests has been a core part of New Zealand's foreign policymaking for some time.

One clear example of this has been the insistence of there being a "[Treaty of Waitangi Exception Clause](#)" – a way of protecting the "government's ability to adopt policies that fulfil its obligations to Māori" – in any free trade agreement (FTA) New Zealand signs. Starting with the FTA New Zealand signed with Singapore in 2001, clauses have been part of subsequent FTAs, including China (2008), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (2018) and the two FTAs New Zealand signed in 2022, with the UK and the EU. Regarding the [EU FTA](#), the "development of business links between Māori and EU enterprises (with a particular emphasis on SMEs), and focusing on science, research and innovation" was singled out as particularly important.

Another area where New Zealand has demonstrated something of an indigenous foreign policy is in its international advocacy of indigenous rights. Although New Zealand's track record in its engagement with Māori is peppered with instances of colonial exploitation and ongoing inequalities, internationally, New Zealand's more recent engagement with its indigenous population is often seen as a kind of [best practice](#). The New Zealand government has signed Indigenous Collaboration Arrangements (ICAs) with the governments of Australia (2020) and Canada (2022). The ICAs focus on collaboration on social, cultural, economic, and political themes, with the aim of creating a relationship bridge between Māori and the indigenous peoples of Australia and Canada.

Assessing New Zealand's indigenous foreign policy in practice, so far

Since Mahuta was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs

in 2020, New Zealand has been much more explicit about incorporating Māori ideas and interests into its foreign policy. This article examines two core areas of New Zealand's current foreign policy to examine whether this indigenous moment has been of consequence or not: its Pacific policy and its relationship with China.

The Pacific

The Pacific – formerly colloquially known as the "South Pacific" – has long been central to New Zealand's foreign policy. New Zealand was previously in colonial control of Western Samoa, seizing it from Germany in 1914, while Niue and the Cook Islands (although no longer part of New Zealand) remain in free association with New Zealand. Only Tokelau remains under the sovereign control of New Zealand. The country has been instrumental in helping set up key Pacific institutions, most notably the Pacific Islands Forum. Furthermore, New Zealand has consistently been one of the largest aid donors to the Pacific, currently trailing only Australia and the United States as a "[grantor](#)".

Although New Zealand's official colonial presence in the Pacific has retreated significantly since its heyday, it has often been accused of maintaining a colonial mindset in its dealings with the region. Officials routinely referred to the Pacific as New Zealand's "backyard" and, over the years, have typically maintained a paternalistic stance in its engagement with these small island states. Indeed, New Zealand acknowledged as much when announcing its "Pacific Reset" in 2018 which was billed by New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as refreshing its approach to the Pacific "driven by our strong Pacific identity and interconnectedness with the region".

Unsurprisingly, then, in Mahuta's inaugural speech, the Pacific received special attention. In addition to acknowledging the importance of the Pacific Reset, Mahuta highlighted that: "Aotearoa has historical, cultural, social, linguistic and kin connections across the Pacific all of which links us to the significant diaspora communities here. We refer to the Blue Pacific Continent as Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa."

She also referred to the "inherent mana of each country" – [mana](#) refers to a kind of spiritual power and status – and the need for partnership based on "the values of whanaungatanga (kinship), kotahitanga (common purpose) and kaitiakitanga (stewardship and care)".

However, despite the increased emphasis on the Pacific as part of New Zealand's indigenous foreign policy turn, New Zealand has received some criticism as to its dealings with the Pacific. In 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, undertook a Pacific-wide tour to try and finalise a "pact" to facilitate cooperation between China and ten Pacific Island States on issues such as policing, security, and data communications. While Australia's Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, won significant praise for immediately departing to Fiji (one of three Pacific trips she has taken in 2022) in an effort to push back on China, Mahuta received criticism for staying in New Zealand and largely ignoring the developing furore.

China

Since signing the FTA in 2008 (which was upgraded in 2022), China has emerged as arguably New Zealand's most important external partner, especially concerning

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."

Although this was also not the first time these metaphors had been used, it was the first time it was used as a framework for talking about the New Zealand-China relationship at the highest level. The timing of this speech was particularly noteworthy as well as it came during a period when China was coming under significant global scrutiny for its alleged crimes against humanity in its Xinjiang province. New Zealand received significant criticism for refusing to partake in a joint "Five Eyes" condemnation of China along with Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

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trade. In 2008, China, as a destination, accounted for a mere 5.8% of New Zealand's exports, but, by 2020 that had risen to 27.7%. That total was only slightly less than combined exports to Australia, Japan, and the US, which accounted for 30.5%. This helps explain why New Zealand has trodden a far more cautious line than Australia with how it has interacted with China on sensitive topics, such as the allegations of crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, the Hong Kong protests, and its handling of COVID-19. New Zealand cannot afford to lose its lucrative trading relationship with China.

New Zealand's relationship with China has come under the umbrella of New Zealand's putative indigenous foreign policy turn. Most notably in 2021, Mahuta used indigenous metaphors – a mythical creature from Māori folklore called a taniwha for New Zealand and a mythical creature from Chinese folklore, a dragon for China – when talking [about the relationship](#): "I see the

other countries of the "Anglosphere" – such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom – that have adopted a much more critical China stance in recent years. New Zealand has long identified as being "independent" in its foreign policy – its [anti-nuclear stance](#) is arguably the hallmark of its foreign policy history – and adopting a more indigenous outlook is in some ways an extension of that. Furthermore, the underpinning relationality of the Māori concepts guiding New Zealand's foreign policy closely aligns with the Confucian and Daoist thought that impacts China's foreign policy. This ontological convergence has the potential to allow New Zealand to etch out a unique "mature" relationship with China, relative to the other Anglosphere countries. However, at the same time, with China's increased efforts in the Pacific and the symbiotic pushback from Washington, New Zealand is increasingly put in a difficult position with how it manages its different key relationships and will come under pressure to ditch its "mature" relationship with China.

What can New Zealand learn from Sweden?

New Zealand's attempt to forge something of an indigenous foreign policy evokes the comparison of another "values-based" foreign policy turn: Sweden's feminist foreign policy. In 2014, Sweden made international headlines when it formalised a [commitment](#) to "applying a systematic gender equality perspective throughout foreign policy", largely modelled from the [UN Security Council Resolution 1325: Agenda for Peace, Women, and Security \(WPS\)](#). Like Mahuta's outlining of four key principles for New Zealand's indigenous foreign policy, Sweden's then Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström, identified three Rs as the core aim of Sweden's feminist foreign policy: Representation, Rights, and Reallocation.

Indeed, Sweden had some initial success in pursuing a strict feminist foreign policy, such as Sweden revoking a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on military cooperation between Sweden and Saudi Arabia in 2015 due to alleged human rights abuses. However, Sweden often failed to practice what it preached, especially when confronted with decisions that potentially conflicted with national interests. For instance, merely a year after revoking the MOU, Swedish-Saudi relations were restored and the incident the year before was forgotten. Another example was an incident in 2017 when members of a trade delegation, led by Sweden's then Trade Minister Ann Linde, chose to wear hijabs, chadors, and long coats on an official visit to Iran. Such a move was seen by some as being completely at odds with Sweden's feminist foreign policy and a tacit endorsement of Iran's extremely patriarchal system.

An evaluation of eight years of Sweden's feminist foreign policy demonstrates recurring inconsistencies in its application. Despite obvious good intentions and some tangible benefits, such as increasing the [gender focus](#) of the EU and the UN, Sweden often failed to practice what it preached, especially when confronted with decisions that potentially conflicted with national interests. Ultimately, it proved impossible for a country which is one of the largest per capita exporters of military technology to concurrently pursue a feminist foreign policy. Consequently, as time went on, Sweden's feminist rhetoric was seen by international audiences as being quite hollow.

Internally in Sweden as well, criticism of its feminist

foreign policy grew louder and in October 2022, the new Swedish government officially ended the policy. The new Foreign Minister, Tobias Billström, stated that "we're not going to use the expression 'feminist foreign policy' because labels on things have a tendency to cover up the content".

Sweden's relative failure to pursue a feminist foreign policy is something of a 'canary down the mine' for New Zealand's attempt to follow an indigenous foreign policy. Like Sweden's difficulty in dealing with Middle Eastern countries, New Zealand's apparent indigenous turn may conflict with other countries that have complex and often difficult relationships with their own indigenous peoples that require careful navigation. Furthermore, given that New Zealand resides in an increasingly geopolitically fraught super-region, the Indo-Pacific, it too will likely be confronted with choices between ethical values and national interest. To this end, New Zealand's independent indigenous foreign policy may inadvertently conflict with that of the traditional allies from the Anglosphere, particularly given that there is a growing push to collectively counter China and re-solidify a presence in the Pacific.

Conclusion

New Zealand's announcement in 2021 of adopting a foreign policy guided by tikanga Māori principles undoubtedly marks an intriguing turn in New Zealand's foreign policymaking; a consolidation of the strong Māori focus that has emerged in Wellington in recent years. However, despite the increased use of Māori concepts in New Zealand's foreign policy rhetoric, it is hard, to date, to discern any real change in policymaking. While New Zealand has used an indigenous framework to try and solidify relations with China, its placement of the Pacific at the core of its foreign policy – one of the chief aims sketched out by Mahuta in her outlining of an indigenous foreign policy – has yet to occur in practice. Even if New Zealand has the best intentions behind pursuing an indigenous foreign policy, and it certainly appears that Mahuta is sincere in this regard, it is likely to face similar challenges that Sweden faced in pursuing a feminist foreign policy, namely the difficulty of choosing values over interests. To this end, increasing geopolitical tension in the Indo-Pacific will add a further layer of complexity for New Zealand, especially in maintaining its mature relationship with China, and bring a values-interests dilemma to the fore of its foreign policymaking.



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