

AUKUS through NZ eyes: A huge cost to budgets and independence

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Lead Editorial

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Former NZ PM Helen Clark questioning AUKUS: Where is the threat? Photo: Screenshot

generation of retired, experienced politicians who see through the hysteria over China that has been contrived to justify a massive increase in military expenditure.

Former Australian prime minister Paul Keating is another one, as was the late Malcolm Fraser, with whom the Australian Citizens Party worked closely before his death in 2015, to promote an independent foreign policy for Australia.

Unlike Australia, NZ has enjoyed an independent foreign policy for the last 40 years, after standing up to the USA in the 1980s over nuclear weapons.

Now Helen Clark has publicly spoken out against “slippage” in NZ’s foreign policy independence, which has come from the previous Jacinda Ardern-Chris Hipkins Labour government and current Christopher Luxon National government buying into the US strategic framing of China as a threat to draw NZ into joining AUKUS Pillar 2.

Clark is well versed in what it takes to maintain NZ’s foreign-policy independence in the face of pressure from former ANZUS alliance partners Australia and the USA.

When she was prime minister in 2003, NZ wanted no part in the invasion of Iraq and Clark asserted NZ’s independence by refusing to join.

Contrast this to Australia, which under John Howard did not exercise foreign policy independence, but took the decision to participate in the invasion. Why? Not because Howard claimed Saddam Hussein presented a threat to Australia, but to support the US alliance.

NZ’s opposition wasn’t forgotten, or forgiven: later in 2003, when Clark was travelling through Australia, she was subjected to a humiliating “random” body search with an explosives detection device at Sydney Airport; as then-NZ associate foreign minister Matt Robson told the ACP in 2022, NZ saw the incident as payback by the Australian government, which would soon be humiliated for

supporting a war on the basis of deliberate lies about weapons of mass destruction that didn't exist.

At an 18 April 2024 event at NZ's Parliament, Helen Clark pointed with pride to NZ's independent foreign policy and the decision not to support the Iraq war, which she said "stands to this day as one of the best decisions we have ever made".

Australians should consider that, with humility, as they contemplate the rest of what Clark said in her speech about the \$368 billion Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) nuclear submarine partnership.

After noting NZ has found its own way without US military security, Clark emphasised that *economic security* is another critical aspect to security. When NZ lost its UK market to the European Union, no so-called liberal democracy was interested in trade deals with the exception of Australia; however, NZ found many doors open around the Pacific rim, especially with China, which has yielded the greatest benefits of all of NZ's trade relationships. China takes 26 per cent of NZ's exports, twice what Australia takes.

Clark said both the USA and China are great powers in the Asia-Pacific (deliberately choosing that term over "IndoPacific" which she described as US geopolitical "framing"— a polite term for propaganda), and NZ should be a voice for de-escalating tensions. Instead of looking narrowly at so-called "shared values", she called for a focus on broader "shared interests". She said: "Our job, if we are maintaining an independent foreign policy, is to navigate both relationships, and not act in ways which support polarisation and support a view that one side is driving tensions."

Clark criticised PM Luxon's claim that AUKUS is "good for our region":

"What is good about joining a ratcheting up of tensions in our region?" she asked. "Where is the military threat to NZ? What does AUKUS Pillar 2 actually offer to NZ that it needs for its own defence?"

Australia should learn from Clark's clarity and adopt our own independent foreign policy, before we talk ourselves into national bankruptcy and a senseless war.

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