

# NEW BROOM MAY SWEEP TO THE RIGHT

**Will Chris Hipkins bring us closer to our traditional allies?**

By Peter Bale

**Expect New Zealand** led by Chris Hipkins to exhibit a stronger commitment to shared defence ties with traditional allies like the United States and Australia, while treading a delicate line to avoid irritating China and paying the price Canberra did.

Hipkins has led the Labour government further to the centre, or even over the centre to the right on domestic policies since taking over from Jacinda Ardern. A shift in foreign policy is more subtle and less well-reported but there are signs of a change of emphasis.

“Hipkins has struck a more ideological tone in his most substantive comments on foreign policy to date,” Geoffrey Miller, an international analyst with the Victoria University Democracy Project wrote in *The Diplomat*.

The new prime minister was firmer in his language on Ukraine than Jacinda Ardern, and new Defence Minister Andrew Little is reviewing Peeni Henare’s decision not to send lethal aid to Kyiv. Then there’s the signals from Little that he’s prepared to look at Wellington joining part of the AUKUS pact with the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

It reflects a shift towards a more overt New Zealand commitment to the new Indo-Pacific bloc Washington is assembling to face Chinese ambitions.

“While there are many geopolitical uncertainties, one thing is clear: across the Indo-Pacific, countries are rearming. And New Zealand looks set to join the pack,” Miller wrote.

There’s an interesting crossover between the international policies represented by Ardern and the domestic focus emphasised by the “bread and butter” of Hipkins.

Ardern was an internationalist in the mould of Helen Clark – a believer in the potential for smaller countries to work through multilateral diplomacy in partnership with like-minded nations to achieve goals they were unlikely to achieve on their own.

Like Clark she also showed faith in or at least a readiness to work with the various anagrammed international organisations that advise and implement agreements from the United Nations and other bodies such as the World Health Organisation.

Wellington, under Ardern, was a model for engagement, cooperation and adherence to commitments made under agreements that can take years to negotiate but provide the mechanisms to implement coordinated international change whether on climate change, the rights of indigenous people, or the protection of the high seas.

A list like that illustrates how much those international pacts can have an impact on domestic policy: obligations to cut greenhouse gas emissions that go directly to our dependence on livestock farming; controversy over the co-governance ideas in the He Puapua report on how to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and restricting exploitation of the seabed around Aotearoa.

Hipkins has at least temporarily pulled back from some of the politically risky domestic policy commitments that flow from some

of those agreements, whether that be surcharges on double-cab utes or taking a less bold approach to co-governance to soften Three Waters. You can bet that foreign diplomats in Wellington feed that back to their capitals as a signal of how committed or not New Zealand is to implement what it has signed up to internationally.

Ardern won an invitation to Beijing from President Xi Jinping, but that trip has yet to appear on the Hipkins diary, while Port Moresby and Brisbane do.

His audiences at home and abroad naturally understand he is playing for time to shift perceptions ahead of the election – trying to bring middle-ground voters across the line to Labour. It is less clear what Hipkins stands for in terms of foreign and defence policy, though it is arguable there too there is a move to the right, especially the idea of joining AUKUS.

Hipkins can also be expected to build on Ardern's engagement with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – increasingly extending its reach way beyond the North Atlantic and into the Indo-Pacific where Washington has renewed alliances with Japan, India and South Korea to find common ground against what Ardern called a "more assertive" China.

New Zealand gets its seat at that table from the commitment to the Five Eyes intelligence sharing pact which survived the crisis over restricting access to nuclear-powered or armed US naval ships and has arguably become more important with the rise of China as well as the threat posed to the international order by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Hipkins has been strong, perhaps stronger than Ardern, rhetorically at least, over Ukraine, using language about the world order and commitments that could apply equally to Taiwan.

"Ukraine's self-defence is also a fight to defend core principles that New Zealanders hold dear: territorial integrity, freedom, fundamental human rights, and an international rules-based system that we rely on for our peace and

prosperity. Where might doesn't mean right," Hipkins said in his first foreign policy comments in February.

It seems possible Hipkins might nudge New Zealand further towards a deeper and more costly military connection to Australia and the United States while trying not to irritate Beijing more than it already has been by the talk over AUKUS and the extraordinary decision from Canberra to commit to a nuclear-powered submarine fleet. Canberra has paid a heavy price, with China taking aim at agricultural exports while still taking Australian iron ore.

## Hipkins has been strong, perhaps stronger than Ardern, rhetorically at least, over Ukraine, using language about the world order and commitments that could apply equally to Taiwan.

It is a delicate dance with Beijing, and Hipkins so far lacks the cachet and subtlety that Ardern and Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta displayed in calling out Chinese expansionism and human rights breaches but agreeing to disagree. Events – especially over Taiwan and China's ambiguous position on Ukraine – may force Hipkins to be clearer about the direction of New Zealand policy overseas.

Robert Patman, Professor of Politics and Director of International Studies at Otago University, sees a subtle shift more of tone than of substance at this stage, telling *North & South*: "There seems to be a difference in emphasis rather than a substantive foreign policy change when

comparing the Ardern and Hipkins eras."

Patman has long argued that Ardern's global reputation and commitment to a multilateral approach to create alliances with smaller countries to give them a seat at a table dominated by big powers was a sort of secret sauce in Wellington's diplomatic armoury.

Hipkins has said he's maintaining the course set by Ardern, saying: "Our foreign policy position hasn't changed just because there's a change of prime minister."

Since then, however, Little has replaced Henare as defence minister and has dropped hints about joining some non-nuclear elements of AUKUS. That alarmed Beijing, which communicated its feelings to Mahuta on her first visit to China after Hipkins' ascent.

"They acknowledged our position on the matter," she said, adding, "We're not a part of those arrangements." One has to wonder if that sets up a future conflict with Little.

Mahuta has handled China with subtlety but not necessarily transparency. No reporters went with her on that first trip to China and she seems to have an aversion to engaging with journalists after bruising years in domestic policy as the face of Three Waters.

As mentioned in an earlier Foreign Correspondence column, Mahuta has also emphasised the importance of Japan as a defence and foreign partner, signing an agreement in which Tokyo and Wellington agreed that the Pacific should be "inclusive, stable and prosperous, and free from foreign interference and coercion".

Were Ardern still in office, foreign and defence policy might be a stronger suit politically – especially against the vague and shifting views of National foreign affairs spokesman Gerry Brownlee, but Hipkins lacks her charisma and gravitas on the international stage so expect him and Mahuta to try to continue a form of quiet diplomacy as she follows his mandate to be "out and about and travelling more" and more visible on the world stage. ■