

NZ Foreign and Defence Policy, 2017-2020

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At about 11 o'clock on the night of the 2020 general election, Jacinda Ardern acknowledged the Labour Party's sweeping victory which had just occurred under her leadership. Imagine if she had immediately left her joyful supporters to step into a time machine conveniently hidden backstage. Walking out of that contraption onto coalition negotiations three years earlier with Winston Peters, Ardern would have known about New Zealand First's political obliteration at the end of her first term in office. Is there any doubt that she would have given Peters and his colleagues less than they were demanding in 2017, knowing how little Labour would need them in three years' time?

A firmer hand from Labour would have reduced New Zealand First's healthy array of seats around the Cabinet table. Most likely this would have changed the role of one or both of two leading Ministers, Foreign Affairs (Winston Peters) and Defence (Ron Mark). Back in 2017 it was almost inevitable that New Zealand First would get one of these outward looking portfolios. Peters had been Foreign Minister before and, as Deputy Prime Minister, needed a senior role to accommodate his standing. A job that requiring him frequently to be offshore would not be a bad thing. Mark, a former soldier who in the run up to the election insisted that New Zealand's defence spending needed doubling, had been waiting for the Minister of Defence spot for much of his political career. So there was a real logic in both appointments. But in giving this portfolio pair to New Zealand First, Ardern and Labour subcontracted New Zealand's external affairs policy to a party which did not always share its more liberal and optimistic international philosophy. As the forthcoming analysis suggests, this choice would influence New Zealand's posture on global issues, and especially its approach to a rising China.

From an Early Wobble to Growing Confidence

The record of New Zealand defence and foreign policy in the 2017-2010 period is sometimes as much about these two New Zealand First personalities as it is about the international challenges that New Zealand would encounter. Their preferences were on display from the outset. In the case of Winston Peters, it was not an especially smooth start because his bugbear issue, relations with Russia, came up early. Lurking in the coalition agreement was a commitment insisted on by New Zealand First for the new government to begin negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement with Moscow and its Eurasian partners.¹ This was

¹ *Coalition Agreement: New Zealand Labour Party & New Zealand First*, 52nd Parliament, Wellington: NZ House of Representatives, 2017, p. 6

odd because by that stage Putin's Russia had achieved full pariah status amongst New Zealand's traditional security partners for its brazen hybrid war campaign against Ukraine. The source of Peters' warmth towards the former superpower remains unclear, but it definitely influenced the Ardern government's response to the dramatic poisoning in the United Kingdom of two Russian expatriots, an act widely attributed to Putin's intelligence services. Rather than join its Five Eyes partners (the United States, Canada and Australia, as well as the UK itself) in blaming Russia, New Zealand stayed on the sidelines with Peters throwing around some fairly unconvincing doubts about the need to hold Moscow to account.²

It would take months for the Ardern government to clarify its position on Russia, (and move closer to the positions of its leading security partners in so doing). But on China, another authoritarian power challenging western influence, Wellington's response was less jarring. Early on in the new government's term, Peters spoke to the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney,³ cementing the importance of leading ally Australia in New Zealand's international outlook. His main subject was the Pacific Reset - a stepping up in New Zealand's commitment to its immediate region for which Australia was the most obvious partner. This was headlined by a significant boost in New Zealand's aid spending in the Pacific, which in turn constituted the main portion of the extra money that Peters had secured from Cabinet to bolster the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. And what had this to do with China? In his Sydney address, and in others later on, the Foreign Minister argued that the influence of New Zealand and its traditional (i.e. western) partners in the Pacific was declining and new players were becoming more significant. It was time to step up and reverse that trend. And the main source of the challenge, indicated Peters, was Beijing's increasing influence.

New Zealand's doubts about China's rise had been growing before Ardern and Peters joined forces to become the new coalition government. During the latter years of John Key's long premiership, and into the months when Bill English briefly was Prime Minister, National's Foreign and Defence Ministers had become more willing to raise concerns about China's posture in the South China Sea and elsewhere.⁴ But Peters brought added concerns to his office, including questions about China's Belt and Road initiative. He had long been a supporter of US preponderance in Asia and took almost a pre-ANZUS crisis view of America's role in the balance of regional power. Among the members of the new Cabinet, this made Peters especially receptive to the concerns about China's behaviour

² See Robert Ayson, "New Zealand and the great irresponsibles: coping with Russia, China and the US" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74:4, 2020, pp. 455-478.

³ Winston Peters, "Shifting the Dial", Speech to Lowy Institute, 1 March 2018, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/shifting-dial>

⁴ See David Capie, "How New is New Zealand's New Language on the South China Sea"? *Incline*, 15 April 2016, <http://www.incline.org.nz/home/how-new-is-new-zealands-new-language-on-the-south-china-sea>

which had been growing within New Zealand national security community (and amongst their counterparts in Canberra and Washington).

But Peters did not set New Zealand's foreign policy course on his own. The government's most senior (hierarchically not chronologically) figure also had something to say. On China, the most crucial question in New Zealand's contemporary foreign policy, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister almost created a good cop-bad cop routine. Jacinda Ardern's version of New Zealand's China policy emphasized optimism and opportunity rather than risk and threat. In her inaugural Prime Ministerial foreign policy address, delivered in Wellington, she explained that New Zealand saw China as a partner in two important areas: trade and climate change.⁵ This was also, indirectly, a comparison with what was going on in Washington as Donald Trump's Presidency gathered steam. The 45th President saw global trade as a drain on America's greatness, (and eschewed the sorts of deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership that New Zealand had advocated). And Trump had pulled the United States out of the Paris climate change accord.

On more than one occasion Ardern would take a dim public view of Trump's xenophobia and his assaults on international cooperation. In September 2018, for example, she delivered a widely reported defence of multilateralism and at the United Nations. While not mentioning the 45th President by name, the direction of her words was clear.⁶ In the following year, when Trump called on four Democratic congresswomen of colour to go home (even though they were American citizens), Ardern voiced her disagreement in no uncertain terms.⁷ This time the rebuke was even more important given New Zealand's recent experience of white nationalist terrorism in the Christchurch mosque shootings.

It was none other than Peters who was dispatched to Muslim capitals to reinforce the values of openness and tolerance that the Prime Minister wanted to be at the forefront of New Zealand's response to this tragedy. But off his own bat the Foreign Minister had been speaking in Washington with a more familiar agenda: to encourage the United States to check China's growing power in the Pacific.⁸ This was one occasion when the geopolitical temperatures being fanned

⁵ Jacinda Ardern, "Speech to New Zealand Institute of International Affairs," 27 February 2018, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech-new-zealand-institute-international-affairs-2>

⁶ See "Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's statement to the United Nations General Assembly," *Stuff*, 28 September 2018, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/107445802/prime-minister-jacinda-arderns-statement-to-the-united-nations-general-assembly>

⁷ Vita Molyneux and Alice Wilkins, "Jacinda Ardern Denounces Donald Trump's comments about Democratic congresswomen," *Newshub*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/07/jacinda-ardern-denounces-donald-trump-s-comments-about-democrat-congresswomen.html>

⁸ Winston Peters, "Pacific Partnerships – Georgetown Address, Washington DC," 15 December 2018, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/pacific-partnerships-georgetown-address-washington-dc>

by the Foreign Minister grew too hot for the Prime Minister. Ardern insisted that her government was not trying to pick sides in the US-China tussle.⁹

This bad cop-good cop routine raised questions about quite what New Zealand's China (and China-US) stance really was. But it created some necessary wriggle room for New Zealand. Similarly, the Prime Minister could take issue with the most divisive American President in recent memory without capsizing the NZ-US bilateral relationship, as officials in Wellington and Washington worked behind the scenes to keep the functional aspects functioning.

The Australia Factor

If the foregoing assessment encourages the view that the entirety of New Zealand's foreign policy consists of creating a comfortable place in between the United States and China, that would be a disservice to the complexity of the real situation. Unlike some Asia-Pacific countries, New Zealand does not have two great powers on its radar screen, but three. Australia may be a medium power in many such contexts, but for New Zealand it's importance is much larger. And in Ardern's first term, developing tensions in trans-Tasman relations were perhaps the most complicating of all of the developments in New Zealand's interactions with the world.

Soon after she became Prime Minister, Ardern travelled to Canberra to affirm the unique importance of Australia in New Zealand's international relations. But she took with her expectations from the voting public that differences over the treatment of migrants would be raised with her Australian counterparts.¹⁰ This would become a familiar and largely frustrating exercise. It was not just that the Liberal-National coalition government continued to rebuff New Zealand's offers to receive some of the asylum seekers stuck in Australia's offshore facilities. Much more problematic was Wellington's inability to change Canberra's mind on the deportation of New Zealand nationals who had spent most of their lives in Australia and who suddenly found themselves back in the country of their birth without social connections and, in some cases, with worrying criminal records.

Ardern's subsequent observation that this problem was becoming a "major irritant" in the trans-Tasman relationship¹¹ understated its divisiveness. The

⁹ See Pattrick Smellie, "PM Never Saw Peters' Pro-US Speech Before Delivery," *Newsroom*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/@pro/2018/12/17/367645/pm-never-saw-peters-pro-us-speech-before-delivery>

¹⁰ See Louise Yaxley, "Jacinda Ardern pressures Australia not to deport Kiwis if they have never set foot in New Zealand," *ABC News*, 2 March 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-02/jacinda-ardern-asks-australia-not-to-deport-kiwi-citizens/9501924>

¹¹ Jamie Ensor, "Influx of criminal deportees from Australia a 'major irritant' to relationship – Jacinda Ardern", *Newshub*, 1 October 2019, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/10/influx-of-criminal-deportees-from-australia-a-major-irritant-to-relationship-jacinda-ardern.html>

impasse was more than just another example of the power asymmetry that favours Australia. It underscored a clash of priorities between New Zealand's arguments about fairness and justice and the Morrison government's uncompromising position on national security. And this was not just about foreign policy: on both sides the disagreement was locked up in domestic politics. Compromise was always going to be much harder to find in these circumstances.

As this disagreement became the default assessment of where New Zealand's most important foreign relationship was at, the last two decades of more positive trans-Tasman visions were being rejected. So often the picture drawn by Prime Ministers of both countries had been one of common commitment to shared external hazards. But these photo opportunities had been drying up, especially on the defence front where myths were often imagined of unbroken ANZAC comradery since Gallipoli. Long gone were the trans-Tasman military missions to peace and stabilization operations in the nearer abroad – from Bougainville and Timor Leste in the late 1990s to Solomon Islands in 2003 and a limited deployment to Tonga in 2006. More recent responses to natural disasters in Fiji did not quite cut the same picture.

Further afield, there was little in the way of Australian-New Zealand jointery in the long Afghanistan War, from which both countries were seeking to extricate themselves. This left the politically more controversial mission in Iraq, where in 2015 New Zealand had begun to deploy army personnel for a training mission under Australia's lead at Taji Base. But Labour had opposed the Key government's deployment decision, and by the time Ardern became Prime Minister, most of the heat from the ISIS period of Middle East conflict was evaporating. It was therefore Ron Mark's job not to extend the mission, but to bring the forces home. That decision was announced in the middle of 2019.¹²

Defence Decisions Aplenty

But if defence was now providing few new opportunities for operational deployments, Mark's three years as Minister comprised an active period for the future of New Zealand deployable capabilities. He secured Cabinet approval not one, but two major defence procurement choices. The second of these, announced in the last months of his role, was the no-brainer, bound to appeal to the full cross-section of New Zealand political opinion. This was for New Zealand to procure C130J "Super Hercules" aircraft,¹³ essential for transporting troops and equipment in all manner of situations: peacekeeping and stabilisation missions, and natural disasters (in the Pacific and at home). The much harder

¹² Jacinda Ardern, Winston Peters, & Ron Mark, "New Zealand to withdraw from Iraq in June 2020," *Beehive*, 10 June 2019,

<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-zealand-withdraw-iraq-june-2020>

¹³ See George Block, "Hercules flight over Auckland to announce \$1.5 billion deal for defence planes," *Stuff*, 5 January 2020,

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300028112/hercules-flight-over-auckland-to-announce-15-billion-deal-for-defence-planes>

accomplishment was the first - the announcement in 2018 that New Zealand would replace the P3 Orion maritime surveillance aircraft with P8 Poseidons.¹⁴ Like the C130Js these new aircraft were in use by several of New Zealand's main defence partners, including Australia. But unlike the Super Hercules, the Poseidons promised a significant combat capability for the New Zealand Defence Force, including for subsurface missions (ie for detecting submarines).

It's not at all surprising that a New Zealand First defence Minister was a strong proponent of the P8 purchase: Mark saw absolutely nothing wrong with a defence force able to participate in combat missions with traditional partners, including and more tricky theatres beyond the South Pacific. But that this decision would happen under a Labour Prime Minister is more notable. Almost twenty years beforehand, Jacinda Ardern's immediate predecessor in that high office – Helen Clark – had turned down the Air Force's plans to update the already ageing P3s with subservice capabilities.¹⁵ Even more surprisingly, the P8 decision got buy in from the Greens, who held several portfolios in the Ardern-led government. Quite how Mark convinced them to sign off would make a wonderful subject for a postgraduate dissertation.

The public explanation for New Zealand pushing on towards a much more ambitious Defence Capability Plan (which Mark would leave for his successor to grapple with) included the argument that a much more challenging regional security environment was in the making. This was laid out in a document which appeared just days before the announcement on the P8s. While not a fully fledged Defence White Paper (something which had not appeared under a Labour Prime Minister since 1987), the Strategic Defence Policy Statement¹⁶ featured an unusually frank account of the more strategically competitive wider region facing New Zealand and its traditional partners. This included some very direct words about China's behaviour, with particular reference to the South China Sea, an issue of considerable urgency and sensitivity in Beijing. By comparison, while the world had already become used to the trials and tribulations of living with Donald Trump in the White House, the United States got a fairly free pass. In combination with the decisions on capability, New Zealand defence policy was now closer to Australian views of the strategic universe than it had been for some time.

On China questions, New Zealand First did not hold a monopoly by virtue of its two externally facing portfolios. The growing importance of the information technology dimension for international strategy guaranteed a front seat on the growing geopolitical contest for New Zealand's intelligence agencies. These

¹⁴ Ron Mark, "New Zealand to buy four P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft," *Beehive*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-zealand-buy-four-p-8a-poseidon-maritime-patrol-aircraft>

¹⁵ See Peter Greener, *Timing is Everything: the politics and processes of New Zealand defence acquisition decision making*, Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2009.

¹⁶ New Zealand Government, *Strategic Defence Policy Statement*, Wellington: Ministry of Defence, 2018.

answered to senior Labour Ministers (Andrew Little and the Prime Minister). And in 2018 there were two public occasions where Wellington's disquiet about China's exploitation of cyber vulnerabilities burst into the public sphere. The later of these was more explicit – towards the end of the year the Government Communications Security Bureau (which has the lead role in signals intelligence) named China as a country whose cyber activities were damaging the interests of organisations operating in New Zealand.¹⁷ Until then only Russia and North Korea had earned that spotlight.

But it was the earlier and more implicit expression of concern about China that made the headlines, and not just in New Zealand. This was the decision to reject a bid by Spark (a leading New Zealand telecommunications firm) to include Huawei in a bid for the upcoming rollout of 5G infrastructure.¹⁸ This decision was taken on national security grounds which were not explained to the public in any detail but which the Ardern government was obliged to consider under legislation. The outcome was widely interpreted as a ban on the Chinese telecommunications company. And thereby, New Zealand was seen to have joined the United States and Australia in banning Huawei.¹⁹ The reality was different: this was not a blanket ban, but a single rejection, and in theory Spark would have been able to submit a new bid including Huawei. But the Ardern government did little to advertise this ambiguity, presumably content with the wider international view that New Zealand had become the latest member of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance to take an unequivocal stand.

From Prosperity to Security... and Vulnerability

By the half way point of Ardern's first term, there was enough evidence to suggest that a change in New Zealand's foreign policy priorities had well and truly occurred. Trends which began in the later years of John Key's Prime Ministership had been turbocharged under the new coalition. Concerns about regional security increasingly crowded out optimism about regional markets. In both cases, China's rise was the dominant factor. And this would also affect what forms of international cooperation took the lion's share of public attention. The debate was no longer about how Wellington should approach what had become to CPPTPP and other free trade instruments. The gradual progress towards the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership rarely made the front pages. Some attention was garnered by the prospect of a Free Trade Agreement with

¹⁷ New Zealand Government Communications Security Bureau, "Cyber campaign attributed to China," 21 December 2018, <https://www.gcsb.govt.nz/news/cyber-campaign-attributed-to-china/>

¹⁸ New Zealand Government Communications Security Bureau, "GCSB Statement." 28 November 2018, <https://www.gcsb.govt.nz/news/gcsb-statement/>

¹⁹ See Meaghan Tobin, "New Zealand bans Huawei from 5G, China has message for New Zealand," *South China Morning Post*, 17 February 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2186402/new-zealand-bans-huawei-china-has-message-new-zealand>

the European Union, a long-term objective if there ever was one.²⁰ But you could guarantee that newspaper space would be available whenever New Zealand's security posture was put in a Five Eyes context. Commercial considerations appeared to have been outbid by security worries.

The Ardern government would not only find itself changing what things in the region New Zealand was talking about, but also what that region ought to be called. Wellington had long been comfortable with Asia-Pacific language. This allowed for two main types of regionalism: small state regionalism with its Pacific Island Forum partners, and East Asian regionalism based on the institutional outgrowths of ASEAN. These were not at the forefront of the move towards an Indo-Pacific nomenclature that had become increasingly favoured by Canberra, Washington, and Tokyo. These three saw a stronger emphasis on the Indian Ocean and tighter connections with India as a way to dilute some of China's influence and play to America's advantages.

New Zealand continued to keep some distance from the Quad – an on again off again Indo-Pacific grouping originally envisioned by Japan's Abe Shinzo with much more obvious connotations of competing with China. This was a big players club. Yet once other smaller states were shifting their conceptions of the region (at least in rhetorical terms) it was hard for New Zealand to exclude itself from the emerging Indo-Pacific conversation. Once Indonesia had persuaded its ASEAN partners that it was time for a change, the writing was on Wellington's wall. New Zealand insisted that in doing so it would be guided by the principles of inclusiveness and multilateralism.²¹ But this qualification was easily lost in the new geopolitics. The Ardern government would even depict its South Pacific interests in Indo-Pacific terms in one of the many Defence Assessments launched by Ron Mark.²²

Another of these documents laid out the NZDF's response to the problem of climate change.²³ But neither this problem nor the changing great power picture would come to dominate New Zealand's view of the world in 2020. Along with every other nation-state on the planet, attention became fixed on a transnational non-state challenger which had no leader, capital city, armed force, or purpose. This was the Covid-19 pandemic which is still the primary issue of international concern as the present chapter is being written. The direct health effects on New Zealanders, as other parts of this volume have illustrated, were not as severe as they were for so many populations elsewhere. But the restrictions on travel,

²⁰ See Sam Sachdeva, "Slow progress on EU trade talks", *Newsroom*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/slow-progress-on-eu-trade-talks>

²¹ "Remarks on the Indo-Pacific – Ben King, Deputy Secretary for Americas and Asia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 23 October 2018, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/media-and-resources/ministry-statements-and-speeches/remarks-on-indo-pacific-ben-king/>

²² New Zealand Government, *Advancing Pacific Partnerships*, Wellington: Ministry of Defence, 2019, p. 5.

²³ New Zealand Government, *The Climate Crisis: Defence Readiness and Response*, Wellington: Ministry of Defence and NZ Defence Force, November 2018.

which the Ardern government instituted before the virus had an opportunity to spread out of control, reflected the disruption to the normal patterns of global interaction which had for so long connected New Zealand to the world. At the time of writing, a transTasman travel bubble with Australia, New Zealand's closest partner, was still yet to eventuate.

The daily business of foreign policy changed too. Diplomacy was still possible by Zoom, but international meetings were even more scripted than before, with few opportunities for the quiet corridor conversations where issues could be hammered out. And rather than a collaborative effort spearheaded at the United Nations, much of the covid-era foreign policy seemed national and unilateral rather than global and multilateral. What the Ardern government said to its citizens had far more weight than what was being said by the World Health Organization (from which America's participation was removed by the Trump Administration). Rather than a new era of cooperation among partners in a crisis affecting everyone, new fault-lines in the political competition were being formed: the already tense relationship between Australia and China (two of New Zealand's three most important partners) headed to a new low as the Morrison government called for an investigation into the origins of the virus.²⁴

The priorities became just two: dealing with the public health crisis that the pandemic was generating, and then also with the economic costs of the recurrent shutdowns. Not much else, including New Zealand's international engagement broadly defined, mattered nearly as much. But Wellington did seek to find some partners in initial efforts to create safe space for value chains and other international connections. Rather than coalitions of the willing, these were coalitions of the trusted. Reminiscent of the P4 group of countries who had opened their economies to each other as a forerunner to the much wider TPP (New Zealand, Singapore, Chile and Brunei), New Zealand entered into some building block collaborations that would hopefully be the start of something more extensive.²⁵ But the overall picture was of a world beset by an interruption of the international connections that had for decades been taken for granted. And in particular this meant far fewer visitors to New Zealand – tourists, international students, sportspeople, and migrants.

This temporarily closed world – entertained by countries like New Zealand which otherwise sought openness – brought some irony to the arguments of nationalism and populism. America First and Brexit were illiberal movements

²⁴ See Michael Walsh, "Australia called for a Covid-19 probe: China responded with a trade war," *ABC News*, 3 January 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-03/heres-what-happened-between-china-and-australia-in-2020/13019242>

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Joint Ministerial Statement affirming commitment to ensuring supply chain connectivity amidst the Covid-19 situation," 14 April 2020, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/media-and-resources/ministry-statements-and-speeches/joint-ministerial-statement-affirming-commitment-to-ensuring-supply-chain-connectivity-amidst-the-covid-19-situation/>

which argued for new restrictions on migration to the United States and the United Kingdom. But as Covid-19 spread like wildfire, it was often leaders with liberal sentiments who were ordering the borders to be closed. We can include New Zealand's Prime Minister in that list. The response Ardern led to the pandemic, along with New Zealand's relatively low levels of infections and deaths, added to her international prominence and popularity, to say nothing of her strong standing domestically. But for her coalition partner, the covid pandemic was politically devastating. Winston Peters had no media airspace as the 2020 general election loomed. He had no platform for the national emergency: that had been taken by Ardern and Health General-Director Ashley Bloomfield. The virus had co-opted New Zealand First's political messaging which in campaign mode often carried a whiff of batten down the hatches. Rejected by the electorate, Peters and his party were exiled from parliament. Labour experienced the reverse: a clear majority unique in the MMP era. And it would thus take control of defence and foreign affairs for term two.

Conclusion

In her initial Prime Ministerial foreign policy address back in 2017, Ardern had drawn connections to her Labour forebears (from Clark and Lange to Fraser) in highlighting New Zealand's internationalism and multilateralism. Reconfigured for the challenges of the early to mid 21st century, this meant substituting progress on climate change for the nuclear free movement of the Lange years. But anyone looking back on the remaining part of Ardern's first term would come away wondering whether climate change – or disarmament – sat at the forefront of New Zealand's international thinking. Hopes for a progressive turn in Wellington's approach to the world were bound to be disappointed, not least because foreign policy was a bargain between a Labour Prime Minister aiming to dominate the centre ground of New Zealand politics and a New Zealand First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister for whom geopolitics was not a dirty word.

One is left wondering what might have happened to New Zealand's outlook on the world if the time machine had been available in late 2017 for Ardern to make a return trip into what was then still the political future. Such a voyage would have revealed much more than the electoral decimation of the party with more than a little empathy for the power politics model of international relations and the populist nationalism of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson. Ardern's reconnaissance of the international situation at the end of 2020 would also have revealed the covid pandemic, the serious deterioration in Australia-China relations, and Trump's electoral defeat.

If armed with that foreknowledge when her first government was sworn into office, would Ardern and her Labour colleagues have thought differently about New Zealand's international choices? Would the geopolitical content of New Zealand foreign policy in the 2017-2020 period been toned down before it began to take off? Would the focus have shifted to the vulnerability of the planet and its peoples? We won't know. But perhaps the second term agenda of the Ardern

government, where New Zealand's external relations are no longer a negotiated exercise in coalition politics, will tell us something about what might have been.