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New Zealand's Foreign Policy Balancing of China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific Region: Narratives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Annual Reports

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Abstract. In the context of the evolving international relations system, small states are vulnerable to changes and transformations due to their limited capacity to adapt to the new operational environment of foreign and security policy risks and challenges. Given the increasing global geopolitical instability, including in the Indo-Pacific region in the wake of the United States' Asia Pivot, this article seeks to address how a small state attempts to navigate the opportunities and risks while pursuing its national interest. The growing geopolitical confrontation between the U.S. and China is creating dilemmas for small states. New Zealand is used as a case study with the use of content analysis of text-based narratives from the annual reports of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The analysis reveals the important role played by various domestic and external factors in shaping New Zealand's approach as it seeks to leverage the best outcome for its aims and goals. Among these factors, the liberal values and norms projected to the outside world and the national brand of the country as a peace-loving power occupy an important place. The foreign policy narrative has thus far employed ambiguity, favouring economic relations with China and political and military relations with the United States to maximise opportunities and spread risks. However, this window is gradually closing with the increased tensions between the U.S. and China, as tensions between the US and China rise, forcing lesser powers to 'choose sides.' In this geopolitical climate, New Zealand's ability to maintain its distinct foreign policy identity is becoming increasingly constrained and the country is losing its subjectivity.

Key words: security, small states, Asia Pivot, strategic ambiguity, rules-based order

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Политика балансирования Новой Зеландии между Китаем и США в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе: нарративы ежегодных отчетов Министерства иностранных дел

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Аннотация. В условиях усиления глобальной геополитической нестабильности малые государства уязвимы перед лицом изменений и трансформации системы международных отношений. Они не обладают достаточными ресурсами для адаптации к новой операционной среде рисков и вызовов своей внешней политике и политике безопасности. В этой связи рассмотрено, каким образом малое государство в преследовании своих национальных интересов может использовать имеющиеся у него возможности и минимизировать риски. Растущая геополитическая конфронтация между США и Китаем, особенно в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе после объявления США политики «поворота к Азии», создает дилеммы для малых государств, расположенных в этом регионе. Изучен кейс Новой Зеландии, чьи нарративы годовых отчетов Министерства иностранных дел и торговли рассмотрены с использованием метода критического нарративного анализа (КНА). Полученные результаты позволили выявить роль различных внутренних и внешних факторов, формирующих подход Новой Зеландии к оптимальному достижению своих внешнеполитических целей в регионе. Среди этих факторов важное место занимают транслируемые во внешний мир либеральные ценности и нормы, а также национальный бренд страны как миролюбивой державы. Отдельно рассмотрено использование Новой Зеландией стратегической двусмысленности в попытках избежать принуждения к отказу от альтернативных издержек, максимизировать свои возможности, распределить риски. Значение стратегической двусмысленности прослежено на примере ее репрезентации экономических отношений с Китаем, политических и военных отношений с США во внешнеполитическом нарративе Новой Зеландии. Сделан вывод, что с ростом напряженности между США и Китаем, вынуждающей малые державы «выбирать» стороны, эта опция для Новой Зеландии постепенно закрывается и страна теряет свою субъектность.

Ключевые слова: безопасность, малые государства, поворот к Азии, стратегическая двусмысленность, порядок, основанный на правилах

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Introduction

The academic study of small states has historically attracted considerable interest, and this popularity has grown with the number of small states in international relations following the end of the Cold War. As the 21st century progresses, small states face an increasing variety of security threats, ranging from

traditional threats such as defence and armaments to economic, societal and environmental concerns. These risks are increasingly complex and multifaceted policy problems that require engagement with traditional power relations as well as newly emerging actors involved in historical political legacies and new policy challenges (Archer, Bailes & Wivel, 2014). These are the dilemmas

and challenges in facing risks and hazards in the 21st century by states with limited resource capabilities and capacities, something that is common to small states in all regions of the world.

The security of a small state and its ability to influence its security environment, which is determined by a combination of a number of macro (physical, ethno-cultural, historical) and micro (economic, military, political system) factors, is related to the relative size and strength of the other international powers with which it interacts, a relative and comparative measure, not an absolute one (Knudsen, 1996).

The aspect of geopolitical competition is central to this article. Geopolitics concerns not only the policy actions and intentions of actors, but also shapes the information realm representations and interpretations of the actors, events, processes and trends in the physical realm that tends to exhibit a more constructivist approach (Simons, 2022). Geopolitical instability in the operational environment poses various risks and hazards, especially for small states that may lack the ability and capacity to manage and regulate these changes in order to adapt to them.

In its strategic documents, New Zealand considers itself to be one of the so-called small states.¹ It is noted by Gee and Patman (Gee & Patman, 2021, p. 34) that by convention “it is believed small states are unable to safeguard their own interests against the encroachment of larger powers in a decentralised or anarchical international environment.” However, it is noteworthy, the peculiarity of New Zealand lies in the fact that the South Pacific which is perhaps the only region, where it is not regarded as a small state. In this context, New Zealand is caught in such a trap, with the strategic representation

¹ Strategic Intentions 2019–2023 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2019. P. 3. URL: https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/PAP_91458/942ab1bb69967e20076fa0f309bf691208bd75da (accessed: 10.05.2022).

of the geopolitical confrontation between the hegemonic Western-centric US unipolar order² pitted against the challenger non-Western-centric multipolar order within the narrative of the New Cold War.³ The regional dimension of this situation is the representation of the geopolitical confrontation between the U.S. and China in the Indo-Pacific region.

The idea is to understand how New Zealand attempts to interpret and represent this trap in its strategic foreign policy documents. The key research question guiding this study is as follows: How do the annual foreign policy reports narrate the increasingly difficult foreign policy dilemma of balancing relations with China and the United States in an era of increased strategic competition and conflict?

The article contains details of the methodology that is employed to make sense of the empirical data that was collected and provides an explanation and justification of a theoretical overview of small state security. The following section summarises New Zealand’s evolving security environment. The next section uses the annual reports published by New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) since 2018 as a case study of New Zealand foreign and security policy stance toward China, the following sections reveal some details of the country’s substantive policy, and finally the conclusion.

The Theoretical and Methodological Dimensions of the Study

In the 21st century, the Western-centric United States unipolar world order is in relative

² Mishra R. Perspectives: ‘Rules-Based’ Order in the Post-Unipolar World // Asialink. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240619101757/https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/stories/rules-based-order-in-the-post-unipolar-world> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

³ Simons G. West vs. Non-West: A New Cold War? // *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*. March 1, 2023. URL: <http://transatlanticpolicy.com/article/1175/west-vs-non-west-a-new-cold-war> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

decline.⁴ Such a process inevitably leads to global geopolitical transformations. As Brady and Thorhallsson note: “The formerly stable post-World War II international order is coming to an end, but the new global order is yet unclear. Earlier expectations about a multipolar order emerging, characterised by cooperation among great powers, has failed to come to fruition. The world is now seeing a return of both ‘might is right’ politics and the reassertion of spheres of influence” (Brady & Thorhallsson, 2021, pp. 1–2).

An unstable and evolving foreign and security policy environment in international relations is especially challenging for small states. This is particularly true given that, historically, small states have frequently been used as pawns in great power competition: “Small states are heavily affected by global shifts in power, and they must rely on the rules-based international order to protect their rights. Small state security depends on stability, predictability, and cooperative solutions to global problems” (Brady & Thorhallsson, 2021, p. 2). But this raises the question: What is a small state and what are its characteristics?

A small state is generally understood to be a nation with a limited area of land mass, a small population and economy, and a relatively modest military capability and capacity (Brady & Thorhallsson, 2021). Henderson (1991) outlined a number of common characteristics of small states, such as:

1) limited resources, resulting in reduced participation in international affairs;

2) narrow scope of interests and engagement in foreign policy interests owing to resource constraints;

3) foreign affairs tend to have a focus on economic issues;

4) small states tend to rely on multilateral formats to protect national interest;

5) small states tend to be moralistic in nature but lack the means to physically back this up;

6) there is a tendency to be risk adverse and to be mindful of alienating powerful states.

There is a necessity for small states to be rather nimble and adaptive to the nature of the surrounding security environment to navigate and mitigate the risks and threats. There are arguments for and against the usefulness of using the conceptual term ‘small states.’ Knudsen (1996, p. 4) argues that the concept should be retained as its utility is found “a focusing device — not an analytical tool.”

There are numerous and varied risks and hazards in small state security, given the constraints and restraints on the hard power capabilities and capacities. Therefore, there is a need to negotiate the wishes, goals and aims of the more powerful actors. Archer, Bailes and Wivel note that “small states have tended to pursue pragmatic and reactive security policies adapting to the interests of nearby great powers and aiming primarily to ensure their own survival” (Archer, Bailes & Wivel, 2014, p. 3). Consequently, small states generally lack the capacity to preserve their autonomy and interests through hard power, necessitating the utilisation of alternative mechanisms and means. Therefore, small states are not usually capable of preserving their autonomy and interests with hard power and require different mechanisms and means. In analysing the challenges and opportunities for small state security, it has been observed that “security challenges to small states are rarely systemic but typically originate in the geopolitical vicinity of the small state” (Archer, Bailes & Wivel, 2014, p. 7). This affects the response strategy and approach of small states.

Those states that are not great powers have essentially four options when dealing with major powers: they can *balance* against them by forming counter-coalitions; they can

⁴ Biden J. R., Jr. Why American Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump // Foreign Affairs. March/April 2020. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

bandwagon with one of them; they can try to *hide* (which is rarely successful); or they can *hedge* by seeking to position themselves in between major powers (Sussex, 2021, p. 33). A fifth option, termed the ‘shelter theory,’ has been developed by the Centre for Small States Studies at the University of Iceland (Thorhallsson, 2019).

The shelter theory identifies three areas that pose the greatest threat to small states: political, economic and societal (Brady & Thorhallsson, 2021). By providing shelter, a larger state can impose its own conditions for cooperation, such as the renunciation of a small state from part of the rights, sovereignty, freedom of manoeuvre and choice. At the same time, the principles of coordinating actions with other partners may be too burdensome for small states, contradicting their national identity, strategic culture, and desired image. All this often leads to an imbalance of benefits and costs of cooperation. A small state realizes that once it is no longer useful to the big players, it will not find it easy to protect its interests. The difference in potentials makes it inevitable for a small state to make great efforts to maintain relations with the hiding state, one way or another, a small country finds itself in the orbit of its interests for a long time.

Therefore, the asymmetry of power and the geopolitical aims and interests of more powerful international actors shape the manner in which small states react to an evolving international relations landscape. Although, Dalby (1993, p. 453) notes that “Political geography can shed some light on the operation of power and on the possibilities for contesting, resisting and subverting dominant understandings of how the world is organised.” This naturally leads to attempts to understand how power affects small states and their (in)ability to assert their interests in international relations.

Knudsen (1996, p. 9) identifies six key variables of power imbalance that appear to influence a small state’s likelihood of preserving its autonomy:

1) how the leading great powers view the strategic significance of the small state’s geographic location;

2) the level of existing tensions between great powers;

3) where in the stage of the power cycle the nearest leading great power is situated;

4) the nature of the historical record of relations between the nearest great power and the small state;

5) the small state’s policy toward the rival great power;

6) the existence of multilateral frameworks for security cooperation that may stabilise the power disparity.

The matter is further complicated when great powers are present in the same geographic area as the small state, which means such variables deliver a rudimentary and narrow understanding of small state security prospects. As Chong and Maass rightly note, “Small states are by no means powerless” (Chong & Maass, 2010, p. 381), as they can pursue a more flexible foreign policy than a medium or large state, therefore the challenge is to identify particular and unconventional sources of small states’ foreign policy power. In addition to the external factors that affect policy responses and directions, there are sets of domestic influences, such as national elite’s ideas, identities and preferences that can facilitate leverage in understanding the foreign policy behaviour of small states (Gvalia et al., 2013, p. 131).

It is also important to distinguish between a small state and a *minor power*, which is defined as “a state with a limited capability to meet its own security needs, but quite independent in its foreign policy thinking and capable of projecting significant or moderate influence in certain regions” (Köllner, 2021, p. 427). Depending on the regional and global balance of power, a small state can pursue an independent foreign policy, presenting itself as a minor power. In order to move this discussion from a theoretical and conceptual one, the example of New Zealand will be used to

demonstrate the practical application of these theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

This study employs the method of *narrative analysis* to interpret official government documents. As has been previously established, narrative research is not only concerned with the content of a narrative, but also its wider context and purpose (Barthes & Duisit, 1975). These are narrated publicly to express a sense of self or to signal an aspect of identity (Cortazzi, 1994; Earthy & Cronin, 2008). The narrative engineers meaning through providing the necessary structure to speech and texts. The importance of the narrative in politics has increased since the end of the Cold War. “Telling one’s story” has become the equivalent of advocating and justifying the point of view of the narrative protagonist, and thus taking the protagonist’s position is a serious political act (Partner, 2009, p. 100).

In this article, we proceed from the exclusive role of narrative in representing and interpreting the events of reality. We proceed from an approach to narrative that works through “a cognitive-based approach that works from the assumption that the story segments are held together by an overarching structure of the plot organisation” (Bamberg, 2012, p. 100). Here, narrative tactics, the ordering of facts in the narrative, and its strategy are considered. “Narrative is a tool for denoting the meaning of the world in which we live ... it is a political enterprise, in which it is not the events themselves that are important, not what happened immediately, but what people say about them, revealing the essence of the events” (Glaser (Kukartseva), 2021, p. 176).

One means of understanding public policy is to use an interpretive method of narrative analysis based on concepts from classical rhetoric and semiotics. This method enables researchers to expose and demonstrate the unstated, and yet implicit understandings of words and texts (Feldman et al., 2004). The choice of analytical tool to be used needs to be related to the nature of the question being asked

and the type of data being sought. A qualitative and critical analysis shall be applied to the collected data to interpret official foreign policy statements by MFAT regarding its position on China.

In line with the above-mentioned aims and goals, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a highly useful analytical tool for interpreting discourse, as it is able to “acknowledge the power of the narrative by recognizing its emotive and persuasive characteristics” (Forchtner, 2021, p. 305). Souto-Manning (2014) proposed the interplay of critical discourse and narrative analyses under the conceptual definition of *Critical Narrative Analysis* (CNA). This is the union of how “narrative analysis focuses on how people make sense of their experiences in society through language; CDA is concerned with power and language in society” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 161). Therefore, CNA can be used as a resource to analyze and interpret the power of discourses that are communicated by institutions that form the bases of the social construction of communicated realities in the political realm. The objective of the process is not to take institutional discourses at face value only.

The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade is the government department that is responsible for the communication and implementation of the New Zealand government’s foreign policy aims and goals. It is therefore articulating these foreign policy aims and goals through the communication of supporting narratives. Since 2018, MFAT has published an annual report every year.⁵ 2018 was a symbolic year in this regard, as it marked the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the New Zealand Foreign Service. These reports are presented to the House of Representatives and concern the progress on their strategic

⁵ MFAT Annual Reports // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/about-us/mfat-annual-reports/> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

intentions and performance measures. To date, five reports have been published and the results released.

New Zealand's Evolving Security Policy Environment

As a small state in the South Pacific, New Zealand has a historical legacy of being tied to a Western great power for its security. Great Britain historically and the United States since 1951, the date of the conclusion of the Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), have become New Zealand's shelter strategy.⁶ The historical legacy of the British colonial origins has exerted a significant influence on the state, shaping its foreign policy into the early Cold War era and the subsequent shift towards the United States. New Zealand saw an opportunity to deepen its relations with Washington, primarily in the economic and trade spheres. Tidwell (2021, p. 21) called it New Zealand's niche free trade strategy for its safe haven. However, the evolving global geopolitical landscape prompted New Zealand to adapt its security environment and seek a new patron to shield it from emerging sources of risk.

Towards the end of the Cold War, in the mid-1980s, there was a further change of course when New Zealand undertook a nuclear free policy prohibiting the entry of nuclear-powered or armed objects into the country, thereby undermining the US-led nuclear deterrence policy and risking its membership in the Western system of military alliances (Dalby, 1993). Cooperation with New Zealand under ANZUS was suspended.

In the early years of the 21st century, New Zealand claimed an international identity as a 'good ally' and sought to project its soft power and good will through its role in peacekeeping

⁶ The Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS Treaty), 1951 // Office of the Historian. Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State. URL: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/anzus> (accessed: 28.01.2022).

missions and brokering peace agreements (Tow & Parkin, 2007, p. 316; Smith, 2022, p. 323). However, despite the events of the 1980s, New Zealand continued to engage with the U.S. According to Tow and Parkin, New Zealand "is not constrained by considerations of alliance loyalty when instigating such initiatives. Nevertheless, many of the security initiatives that come out of Wellington are generally congruent with the spirit, if not the execution of American security policy" (Tow & Parkin, 2007, p. 324).

Loughlin (2018) argues that New Zealand was put in a position where it felt compelled to support the U.S. in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, publicly expressed as a united stance against terrorism, while privately, the concern was that New Zealand might be denied 'a seat at the table' if it did not. New Zealand has never left, for example the global intelligence alliance or Five Eyes, which Wellington joined in 1956. As a result, the efforts of the administrations of Helen Clark of the Labour Party (1999–2008) and John Key of the National Party (2008–2016) culminated in a warming of relations with the U.S. In 2010 and 2014, the Washington and Wellington Declarations were signed, which signalled a renewed military cooperation between the two countries.⁷

However, with the U.S. announcement of a 'pivot to Asia' in 2012 as part of a strategy to contain China,⁸ as well as with Russian turn to

⁷ See: Wellington Declaration on a New Strategic Partnership Between New Zealand and the United States // U.S. Department of State. November 4, 2010. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/150401.htm> (accessed: 13.01.2022); Washington Declaration on Defense Cooperation Between the USA and New Zealand // The New Zealand Herald. 2012. URL: <https://media.nzherald.co.nz/webcontent/document/pdf/201225/WASHINGTON%20DECLARATION%20ON%20DEFENSE%20COOPERATION.pdf> (accessed: 13.01.2022).

⁸ Cambell K., Andrews B. Explaining the US 'Pivot' to Asia // Chatham House. August 2013. URL: https://kritisches-netzwerk.de/sites/default/files/explaining_the_us_pivot_to_asia_-_kurt_campbell_and_brian_andrews_-_the_asia_group_-_august_2013_-_9_pages_0.pdf (accessed: 13.01.2022).

the East and its idea of creating a Greater Eurasia creation, the signalling of a new era of great power geopolitical competition and conflict was announced (Glaser (Kukartseva) & Thomann, 2022). The South Pacific, which has naturally been preoccupied by these processes, is perhaps the only region where New Zealand is not regarded as a small state, but a small power with its own interests. These interests inevitably intersect with those of China in the region, and in 2018, as the US's pivot to Asia and Russia's pivot to the East took shape, they finally took shape as a problem.

The problem with New Zealand's relationship with China is that the national security of New Zealand depends directly on its relations with China: in the economic dimension, the two countries have many common economic interests. For a long time, the main content of China — New Zealand relations was trade. In 2008, New Zealand signed a free trade agreement with China, which gave both countries many preferences. The agreement was updated and came into force in 2022. Four new areas — policy e-commerce, government procurement, environment and trade were added to it, which allowed New Zealand “establishing new channels for dialogue and policy cooperation with China.”⁹

In the societal dimension, statistical calculations show that although the projected growth of Chinese New Zealanders will decrease from 5.3% in 2018 to 1.6% in 2038, it will remain stable, allowing Chinese New Zealanders to influence domestic politics.¹⁰ New Zealand “is moving to ban large foreign donations to political parties and candidates and

⁹ FTA Upgrade // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/free-trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements-in-force/nz-china-free-trade-agreement/fta-upgrade/> (accessed: 26.09.2023).

¹⁰ Forecast of the Annual Population Growth Rate in New Zealand from 2018 to 2038, by Ethnicity* // Statista. May 18, 2017. URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/714932/new-zealand-population-growth-rate-forecast-by-ethnicity/> (accessed: 26.09.2023).

to strengthen disclosure requirements for political advertising.”¹¹

In the military dimension, some countries of the Pacific Islands — an existential territory for New Zealand — would like to strengthen cooperation with China, seeing in this an opportunity not only for their own economic development, but also for ensuring military security (Smith & Wesley-Smith, 2021). Pacific Island states are potential territories for Beijing's military bases; China has already concluded a strategic partnership agreement with East Timor¹² and a security agreement with the Solomon Islands.¹³ While not all is going well for Beijing, as evidenced by the outcomes of the 2022 and 2023 U.S. — Pacific Islands summits, and the fact that “Pacific countries have declined to sign up to a sweeping regional economic and security deal proposed by China, after a crucial meeting of Pacific foreign ministers and their Chinese counterpart,”¹⁴ New Zealand has its reason to be alarmed in terms of their traditional foreign policy relationships.

¹¹ Chase M. S., Moroney J. D. P. Regional Responses to U.S. — China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Australia and New Zealand // RAND Corporation. December 17, 2020. P. 17. URL: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4400/RR4412z1/RAND_RR4412z1.pdf (accessed: 10.05.2022).

¹² Full Text: Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership // Xinhua. September 23, 2023. URL: <https://english.news.cn/20230923/1875e6d9e27f40bb961b234acd935c60/c.html> (accessed: 10.12.2023).

¹³ Joint Statement on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Featuring Mutual Respect and Common Development for a New Era Between the People's Republic of China and Solomon Islands // Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Sweden. July 10, 2023. URL: http://se.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw_0/202307/t20230711_11111191.htm (accessed: 10.12.2023).

¹⁴ China's Foreign Minister Tells Pacific Leaders ‘Don't Be Too Anxious’ After They Reject Regional Security Pact // The Guardian. May 30, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/30/chinas-foreign-minister-to-meet-with-pacific-nations-amid-push-for-sweeping-regional-deal> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

On the other hand, New Zealand belongs to the Anglosphere and has strong commitments to its allies, China's strategic opponents; New Zealand's international and national identity, and the values it shares, are largely at odds with those of the Chinese: "China holds views on human rights and freedom of information that stand in contrast to those that prevail in New Zealand."¹⁵ Due to the complexity of the current problem, initially New Zealand's security stance to China's global rise differed from other liberal democracies in the US orbit. Here Wellington has a distinctive worldview — it lacked the political and security frictions of its global identity stance as a 'small trading nation' and a 'good international citizen.'

Before China's rise as being a problem for the US-led Western-centric order, it was the pursuit of economic security that led to increased Chinese engagement with New Zealand, trumping US concerns about political and military cooperation. However, as the geopolitical competition and conflict between the U.S. and China intensified, New Zealand faced a growing dilemma on how to balance its traditional security ties with the U.S. and its rapidly growing trade ties with China (Steff & Dodd-Parr, 2019). A study of Annual Reports of MFAT which reflect New Zealand's declarations on its stance toward China allows us to trace how and on what basis the choice of the New Zealand's policy as a small power in relation to China was formed.

New Zealand's China Security Posture According to MFAT Reports

In the first of these reports, the 2015-2019 Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Brook Barrington, noted in the Chief Executive's Foreword "serving New Zealand's interests in turbulent times depends on a robust, responsive

¹⁵ Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018 // New Zealand Ministry of Defence. July 6, 2018. P. 17. URL: <https://www.defence.govt.nz/publications/strategic-defence-policy-statement-2018/> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

organisation and on New Zealand's reputation as a principled country."¹⁶ Furthermore, he noted that New Zealand "relies on four foreign policy pillars to safeguard our prosperity and security. These are: supporting a rules-based international system; participating in international and regional bodies; leveraging a network of strong bilateral relationships; and building a diverse portfolio of export markets."¹⁷

These statements by Barrington are in-line with a hybrid foreign policy approach that seeks to address multiple security objectives and balance the interests and demands of the great powers operating in the region at a time of markedly heightened geopolitical competition and conflict between the U.S. and China. On the one hand, the balance is aimed at remaining an active and committed member of the politically and hard security-focused US-led Western-centric order, but also keeping trade focused security options open. This is consistent with Gee & Patman's (2021), Smith's (2022) and Young's (2017; 2021) observations on the hedging between the strategic alignments (politically with the U.S. and economically with China) by New Zealand.

One of the strategic foci was the further development of formalised bilateral trade relations with China, "held three rounds of negotiations on the China Free Trade Agreement upgrade to modernise the 2008 Agreement."¹⁸ The 2018 Annual Report highlights that New Zealand seeks to communicate through words and actions its international identity, a responsible and engaged

¹⁶ MFAT Annual Report: 2017–18 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2018. P. 2. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2018/MFAT-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ MFAT Annual Report: 2017–18 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2018. P. 15. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2018/MFAT-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

values-based member of the international community, which is politically and ideologically aligned with the US-led ‘rules-based order’ and yet is pragmatically trade aligned with China.

In the second 2019 report, Chris Seed, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade since 2019, identified a deterioration in global stability that affected New Zealand’s interests and contested values that the country supported. The identified threats pertained to challenges to the institutional structure of the rules-based system, such as tackling instances of protectionism through the World Trade Organization (WTO) that affected New Zealand’s export sector.¹⁹ The issue of the trade focus is at the forefront of the concerns, and the role of Western-centric international institutions in regulating a trade environment that is advantageous to New Zealand. This is encapsulated later in the report: “New Zealanders’ long-term wellbeing depends on the international community working together to safeguard shared global resources, promote global norms and achieve sustainable development.”²⁰ The report places significant emphasis on the ‘necessity’ of upholding and maintaining the ‘international rules-based’ (US-led) system as the fundamental basis for ensuring collective benefits for the community of international actors.²¹

At the same time, New Zealand is seeking to deepen and diversify economic and trade ties, including explicitly with China.²² It is also noted that, “New Zealand engaged with China on the Belt and Road Initiative, including visits to China by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Trade and Export

Growth. Officials have resumed negotiations with China on a Belt and Road Initiative work plan.”²³

The dilemmas and contradictions arising from geopolitical change are presented not only as risks but also as geostrategic imperatives: “Geopolitical change makes our work on building regional consensus on rules and shaping norms that advance our interests even more important.”²⁴ Here, New Zealand seeks to position its role as an arbitrator or intermediary in solving of international tensions and conflicts, which is one aspect of its international that has been cultivated in the wake of the end of the Cold War.

The adaptive and pragmatic nature of New Zealand’s foreign policy and security outlook also creates new constellations of value and norm-based cooperation with China: “New Zealand and China cooperated on major common interests including climate change and the world trade system. We have been clear on issues where we differ and have sought to manage in a mutually respectful way.”²⁵ This statement underscores the fundamental values and norms that are intrinsic to New Zealand’s identity, an aspect of being a very principled member of the international community.

The next, third annual report occurred at the start of the COVID-19, which Chris Seed evaluated as exacerbating the existing international tensions: “Before COVID-19, New Zealand was facing a concerning global outlook clouded by strategic tension and a weakened international order. The pandemic has created significant new headwinds as well as exacerbating these trends.”²⁶ This assessment of the global geopolitical order and the balance of power is seen as gradually shifting away from

¹⁹ MFAT Annual Report: 2018–19 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2019. P. 2–3. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2019/Annual-report-2019-Web-Edition.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

²⁰ Ibid. P. 6.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. P. 17.

²³ Ibid. P. 21.

²⁴ Ibid. P. 20.

²⁵ Ibid. P. 37.

²⁶ MFAT Annual Report: 2019–20 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2020. P. 2. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2020/MFAT-Annual-Report-2019-20.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

the US-led world order towards another configuration, with the pandemic creating new threats and challenges and exacerbating existing ones. The concern about the decline of the ‘rules-based’ international order is found in the understanding of the institutions and codes of conduct of this order as a tool or mechanism for pursuing New Zealand interests: “Strengthen, protect and use international rules and institutions to pursue New Zealand values and interests.”²⁷ New Zealand feels adapted to the existing hegemonic system of international relations where they are more at ease in understanding and utilising the system to its best advantage.

COVID-19 added complexity to New Zealand’s strategic ambiguity with further constraints and restraints, such as the disruption of global supply chains. However, there was also continuity observed in the foreign/security aims, goals and programmes. A number of these continued, such as attempts to use the regional and international institutions of the rules-based order to pursue climate goals and freer international trade that is consistent with the key communicated values and norms in New Zealand’s international brand identity.

One of the strategies for achieving this in an increasingly challenging operational environment is to build and leverage specific international relationships to achieve goals, including utilising past relationship experience and interactions.²⁸ This can be seen in the balance between Western and non-Western partnerships, such as sustaining the partnership with the U.S. where New Zealand supports the U.S. and expects reciprocal support. But at the same time, “Our comprehensive strategic partnership with China remains on a sound basis to realise benefits, work constructively on

²⁷ MFAT Annual Report: 2019–20 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2020. P. 18. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2020/MFAT-Annual-Report-2019-20.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

²⁸ Ibid. P. 45.

mutual interests and manage risks.”²⁹ Thus, the relationships, even with great powers, are expected to be reciprocal and symmetric in nature.

In 2021, the fourth report, COVID-19 further complicated an already complex and turbulent international environment. Much of the rhetoric and many of the assertions and statements made in earlier annual reports were repeated in this document. This is especially in terms of reference to rules, values and norms of the rules-based order: “New Zealand derives security and prosperity from the stability and safeguards of a rules-based international system. This system is founded on relationships between states through international law, frameworks, and multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations, WTO, and World Health Organisation.”³⁰ The preservation of the US-led Western political order continues to be a priority for reasons of self-interest and the benefits for New Zealand in continuing the system. There is an emphasis on New Zealand’s commitment to military and intelligence cooperation within pro-Western institutions and countries aligned with the Western-centric ‘rules-based’ order.³¹

The narrative of export and trade importance, of New Zealand as a small and peaceful trading nation identity, also featured prominently. This included references to the importance of building trade relations with China. During this report period, the updated Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China was signed.³² On April 7, 2022, the updated to the New Zealand — China FTA came into force.³³

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ MFAT Annual Report: 2020–21 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2021. P. 10. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2021/MFAT-Annual-Report-2020-21-v2.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

³¹ Ibid. P. 33–34.

³² Ibid. P. 3.

³³ FTA Upgrade // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/>

The fifth and final report to date at the time of researching and writing this article, which was released in 2022, continued the narrative theme of challenges to the rules-based order as well as the challenges and opportunities that are implied for New Zealand as a result. This includes the observation of increasing geostrategic tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, which exhibit no signs of abating. This partly explains New Zealand's participation in the organization "Partners in the Blue Pacific" established in June 2022.³⁴

In the foreword, Chris Seed mentioned the cultural and historical basis of New Zealand's foreign policy and security identity, with reference to the resulting norms and values as being derived from the country's "unique bicultural heritage" as articulated in the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.³⁵ This reference acknowledges the role and influence of the domestic political, historical and cultural aspects in the international communication of expressions of brand and reputation identity.

There was further continued advocacy for the protection and preservation of the rules-based order and its institutions as a means of

en/trade/free-trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements-in-force/nz-china-free-trade-agreement/fta-upgrade/ (accessed: 26.09.2023).

³⁴ Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the Establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) // The White House. June 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/24/statement-by-australia-japan-new-zealand-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-on-the-establishment-of-the-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-pbp/> (accessed: 12.07.2022).

³⁵ An agreement signed by representatives of Great Britain and the chiefs of Māori people from the North Island of New Zealand on February 6, 1840, at Waitangi. In accordance with the agreement, the territory of New Zealand came under the control of Great Britain. See: MFAT Annual Report: 2021–22 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2022. P. 4. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2021-22.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

pursuing New Zealand's values and interests.³⁶ However, the element of strategic ambiguity remained with the announcement of the entry into force of the FTA with China, while at the same time acknowledging closer economic ties with U.S.³⁷

The 2022 report also indicates a convergence of the security and economic dimensions of foreign policy aims and objectives. The document includes a statement to "embed New Zealand as an active and integral partner in shaping an Indo-Pacific order that delivers regional stability and economic integration."³⁸ This statement is more fitting with Gee & Patman's (2021) characterisation of New Zealand as a minor power rather than a small state. However, it is also consistent with the continuity of the narrative of New Zealand's international identity as an engaged and responsible member of the international community, using values and norms.

In its annual reports, MFAT characterises New Zealand as a small state rather than a minor power, which has to do with the brand and reputation management aspects of maintaining its international identity. New Zealand seeks to preserve the US-led Western 'rules-based' order, being aligned politically with global liberalism, and perceives China as an increasing threat to this declining global order. New Zealand has avoided full alignment with either of the two great powers, the U.S. or China (Skripnichenko & Pale, 2017). This is more consistent with the strategy and behaviour of a minor power, rather than a small state (Gee & Patman, 2021, p. 34). However, as the strategic competition between the U.S. with China intensifies, the room for the traditional strategic ambiguity of New Zealand that permitted a more independent foreign policy

³⁶ MFAT Annual Report: 2021–22 // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2022. P. 12–14. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/About-us-Corporate/MFAT-corporate-publications/MFAT-Annual-Report-2021-22.pdf> (accessed: 10.05.2022).

³⁷ Ibid. P. 17, 41.

³⁸ Ibid. P. 20.

that sought to address different security concerns and interests, is diminishing, as the window for independence from the geostrategic imperatives of the great powers is closing. The policy preferences and responses to hegemonic demands are variously and situationally guided by core values or interests.

The Relationship Between New Zealand's Declared Policy Toward China and Its Empirical Track Record

The Annual Reports of MFAT reflect New Zealand's official foreign policy declarations on its stance toward China, which correlate with the country's substantive policy. The geopolitical climate in 2008 and 2018 was significantly different, especially concerning U.S. — China relations. In 2008, competition between the great powers was low, giving New Zealand more leeway to pursue a more independent policy path. In 2018, the level of global geo-economic and geopolitical tensions has increased significantly.

In 2018, New Zealand's strategy was to increase and intensify bilateral economic ties and interactions with China, while still being politically aligned with the U.S. in the era of the Trump administration and the increased level of geo-economic and geopolitical tensions. In 2019, the intensifying geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China was becoming more noticeable, but as noted by Steff & Dodd-Parr (2019) as well as Köllner (2021), New Zealand is still trying to balance its international relations by splitting them between political and economic.

New Zealand's relative strategic irrelevance in the great power competition in 2020–2022 has been one of the factors that has bestowed upon the country the ability to engage in hedging its security alignments, including the economic alignment with China while maintaining a political and military alignment with the U.S. (Steff & Dodd-Parr, 2019, p. 109). Therefore, we believe that New Zealand in its foreign policy really has moved away from the

niche policy of a small state in the shelter of a large one and has moved towards a policy of hedging (Koga, 2018). Hedging is a strategy that is intended to avoid making trade-offs that come with either balancing or bandwagoning but is difficult to achieve in an unstable and volatile geopolitical environment.

However, as competition between the U.S. and China intensifies, such room for alignment manoeuvre will likely shrink for small states, such as New Zealand, and the opportunities for neutrality or ambiguity evaporate. This scenario has begun to play out, and New Zealand that have been pressured to curtail its close economic ties with China had to recalibrate its policy towards China. This was reflected in the *Defence Policy and Strategy Statement* and the *Future Force Design Principles*. The key idea is in shaping New Zealand's "security environment, focusing in particular on supporting security in and for the Pacific."³⁹

Maritime security is extremely important to New Zealand as a maritime nation. For example, New Zealand launched the P-8A project: Eyes on Ohakea — the construction of a military base in Manawatu for the Boeing P-8A Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft. This project strengthens marine surveillance capabilities, protects fisheries resources in New Zealand's large exclusive economic zone, remote areas and around Pacific Island nations.⁴⁰

In contrast to its American and Australian colleagues, Wellington has refrained from directly criticizing China's policies in the region.⁴¹ New Zealand's approach is based on

³⁹ Defence Policy Review: Future Force Design Principles 2023 // New Zealand Ministry of Defence. August 4, 2023. URL: <https://www.defence.govt.nz/publications/defence-policy-review-future-force-design-principles-2023/> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴⁰ P-8A Project: Eyes on Ohakea // New Zealand Ministry of Defence. March 29, 2022. URL: <https://www.defence.govt.nz/the-latest/story/p-8a-project-eyes-on-ohakea> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴¹ New Zealand Says 'Uncomfortable' with Expanding Five Eyes // The Star. April 19, 2021. URL:

the principles that were stated by Prime Minister in 2017–2023 Jacinda Ardern: “We are a trading nation, we rely on trade and we rely on the predictability of people applying the rules and the rules being applied fairly.”⁴² In doing so, New Zealand is seeking to avoid the kind of consequences faced by Australia,⁴³ which has sharply criticized Beijing over issues such as Hong Kong and the treatment of Uyghurs, namely punitive duties on more than a dozen Australian goods, including wine and barley.

New Zealand’s readjustment of its China policy has been “less straightforward, more contested and overall more ambiguous” (Köllner, 2021, p. 405). It can be understood as resulting from several factors, such as the nature of domestic politics, with an understanding that small states need to be much more pragmatic in their dealings and relationships with bigger states, where New Zealand is a taker of security and not a granter “...while small power status does indeed influence such states’ behaviour, it does not ultimately determine it. Choices and thus agency on the part of small powers matter” (Köllner, 2021, p. 428). This is particularly relevant and applicable in the situation where bigger powers attempt to force smaller powers into making a policy decision that they do not want to make and may be against their interests to concede.

At the same time, Wellington is aware that China’s growing influence in the South Pacific could undermine and threaten stability in the

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2021/04/19/new-zealand-says-039uncomfortable039-with-expanding-five-eyes> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴² NZ Aligned with Principles Not Countries over APEC Divisions — Ardern // RNZ. November 20, 2018. URL: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/376352/nz-aligned-with-principles-not-countries-over-apec-divisions-ardern> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴³ Edmonstone G. China’s Trade Restrictions on Australian Exports // The United States Studies Centre. April 2, 2024. URL: <https://www.ussc.edu.au/chinas-trade-restrictions-on-australian-exports> (accessed: 10.04.2024).

region.⁴⁴ But the increase in US military presence not only in the Pacific territories, particularly Guam, but also in other states in the region is causing concern in New Zealand.

In 2018, New Zealand implemented the ‘Pacific Reset.’⁴⁵ This was linked not only to the emergence of a Labour-led coalition government in 2017, but also to rising strategic anxieties in the South Pacific and the need to ensure sub-regional security (Iati, 2021). Trade Minister in 2017–2020 David Parker said that New Zealand’s strategy was to act as an ‘honest broker’ between China and the U.S.⁴⁶ However, the Pacific Reset is implicitly ambivalent: in Polynesia, whose main threat is natural disasters and climate change, New Zealand is cooperating with China, and in Micronesia — with the U.S.

New Zealand did make some gradual shifts towards its more hard-line Western partners, including joining the US-led Blue Pacific Pact. This occurred against the backdrop of increased US military and political engagement with three Pacific states: Palau, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia.⁴⁷ All this indicates that the country’s real policy is in line with the key stratagems outlined in the annual reports of the MFAT. The country would be at risk if it were forced to ‘choose’ a side in a geopolitical conflict between the great powers.

⁴⁴ Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018 // New Zealand Government. July 6, 2018. P. 17, 24. URL: <https://www.defence.govt.nz/publications/strategic-defence-policy-statement-2018/> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴⁵ New Zealand in the Pacific // New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. November 14, 2018. URL: <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/media-and-resources/new-zealand-in-the-pacific> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴⁶ Novak C. New Zealand’s Chin Reset? // The Strategist. December 20, 2018. URL: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/new-zealands-china-reset/> (accessed: 01.03.2022).

⁴⁷ Razdan K. US Senate Passes Funds for Pacific Island Nations After Congressional Delays // SCMP. March 9, 2024. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3254773/us-senate-passes-funds-pacific-island-nations-after-congressional-delays> (accessed: 01.02.2024).

Conclusion

In the introduction to this paper, the following research question was posed: How do the annual foreign policy reports narrate the increasingly difficult foreign policy dilemma of balancing relations with China and the United States in an era of increased strategic competition and conflict?

We answered it in two ways. Firstly, by way of the wider conceptual and theoretical picture of understanding the convergences and divergences between New Zealand and academic literature on small states seeking security. Secondly, the practical dimensions of policymaker and practitioner words and deeds in addressing New Zealand's search for security and the outcome of the operational aspects.

The vulnerability of small states to changes and transformations in the international system was a very common and recurring narrative in the MFAT annual reports. There are numerous references in all the reports on the urgency and necessity of upholding the international rules-based system, linked to the US-led Western-centric order. The narrative analysis of the annual reports confirms that New Zealand meets all six outlined criteria of a small state that necessitates a rather flexible and adaptive approach in international relations in order to mitigate risks. A high degree of balance and caution is required. This in turn creates a pragmatic and reactive approach towards great powers as a means for survival as noted in prior research observed that the political geography influences how much leeway and room for manoeuvre a small state may have with larger powers is related to the proximity of small states to the zone of contestation and conflict. Given New Zealand's physical location is relatively remote from key strategic points in the Indo-Pacific region, it has a relative level of freedom that is not permitted for small states in the South China Sea for instance. Finally, as previous academic studies have noted, being a small state does not equate to absolute powerlessness if an

innovative and appropriate adaptive strategy is employed, which is what New Zealand is attempting to do.

There is a notable degree of consistency in the narratives in the annual reports on how New Zealand is responding to the changing geopolitical environment and the various opportune, as reflected in the MFAT annual reports, highlights a reactive approach that seeks to avoid antagonising or alienating either of the two great powers (the US and China). In doing so, New Zealand is strategically aligned with the US-led rules-based order, both politically and militarily, and economically with China.

Furthermore, the role and function of values and norms in the search for security by small states was also noted. New Zealand is no exception to this approach, where there are clear sets of values and norms expressed that shape an international brand identity for New Zealand as an engaged and responsible small actor in international relations that seeks to be a force for good in an increasing turbulent and unstable geopolitical environment. The underlying motivation for this communication is the desire to use the resulting soft power for leverage with great powers, in logic of great powers recognising and rewarding 'good' deeds. A stated geostrategic imperative for New Zealand is the preservation of the international institutional political and military architecture of the rules-based order, as it is seen as beneficial to a country with an identity as an independent small trading nation, and pressure on this system is seen as a direct threat to New Zealand's security interests.

Another factor that is apparent is the role of domestic politics and history in informing the values and norms in the international identity brand, and the quality of the diplomatic history and interactions with great powers that informs the qualitative nature of the current and future relations with specific powers.

Answering the key question of the article, we conclude that to insure against the asymmetry of power projection in the

confrontation between the U.S. and China at the centre of Indo-Pacific, which directly or indirectly attracted all the small states of the region. Of the five possible strategies of small states, New Zealand is implementing the hedging strategy. The tools of implementation are strategic ambiguity, a pragmatic approach to great powers, and positioning itself as a small power.

In this way, New Zealand maintains an optimal foreign policy balance of interests. The main reason for New Zealand's position is that the country it is a recipient of security, not a provider, with China as a provider of its economic security and the U.S. as the provider of its political and military security. This presents an obvious dilemma and contradiction

in New Zealand's desire to maintain the institutions and system of a rules-based order while simultaneously seeking to expand trade ties with China. This is the peculiarity of New Zealand's behavior towards China in the international arena.

But what are the prospects for continuing the policy of strategic ambiguity and not taking sides in the growing tensions between the U.S. and China? The moment when this "choice" will be forced may come relatively soon, given the current trajectories of change in global security. From our perspective, New Zealand's ability and space for hedging is shrinking, threatening to reduce the country to an object rather than a subject of international relations.

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