

**New Zealand and the Great Irresponsibles:
Coping with Russia, China and the US
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Abstract

New Zealand's willingness to call out irresponsible great power behaviour is a major test for Jacinda Ardern's promise that her government will stand up for its values internationally. In fact, New Zealand has been weaker on Russia's irresponsibility in the Ardern era than it was under the National Party-led governments of John Key and Bill English. The situation is reversed, however, for New Zealand's response to irresponsible international behaviour by China from the South China Sea to cybersecurity and human rights. Ardern's commitments to international tolerance and cooperation have also made for a stronger response to the divisive turn in US foreign policy under Donald Trump. But there has also been greater inconsistency in New Zealand's positioning since Ardern became Prime Minister in late 2017. Among the explanations for these trends is the Labour Party's agreement to hand the foreign affairs and defence portfolios to the New Zealand First Party, which has amplified the contribution to New Zealand policy pronouncements by the Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters.

Keywords: New Zealand, Russia, China, the United States, great powers

Forty years ago, as détente was giving way to renewed Cold War distrust, Hedley Bull accused the United States and Soviet Union of ignoring their responsibilities as great powers. Not that it had always been so. In the mid-1960s Bull began to argue that the two superpowers were taking small but important steps towards cooperation in their relationship. Instead of relying on an accidental nuclear stalemate, he suggested Moscow and Washington had become aware that they needed to regulate their military competition. This conscious management was revealed in formal negotiations for treaty-based arms control agreements. Underlying these explicit steps was something even more significant: an informal understanding on the need for restraint.

By 1980 Bull concluded that this promising course in great power cooperation had been reversed. He called out the two giants for walking away from the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) II process and for becoming too fond of military intervention. The Reagan Administration was flexing its muscles in Central America and the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan. Because these two antagonists were ignoring the fact that as great powers they had 'special duties' as well as 'special rights', Bull (1980: 446) called them great irresponsibles. His conclusion was somber:

'What we have been witnessing since the mid-1970s is the abandonment by the superpowers of their postures as superpower managers. The work

of erecting a structure of cooperation has been abandoned, and what has been put in place is beginning to decay.'

Notions of responsibility in international affairs are bound to reflect the context of the era in which they are formulated. For Bull, the central responsibility of the great powers was to promote orderly interstate relationships, most specifically against the common threat of nuclear catastrophe. This nuclear order was the most urgent prerequisite for an international society, a limited form of interstate cooperation which had been the subject of his best-known work (Bull, 1977).

More than a generation later, the requirements for responsible behaviour are likely to have evolved. For example, the more that climate change is seen as the main threat to human survival, the more we might expect responsibility to imply a commitment to international rules regulating carbon emissions. Or if greater attention is being paid to international justice as opposed to international order, responsible behaviour may involve a commitment to rules and standards pertaining to human rights. And even if we stick to considerations of interstate security, the emergence of new behaviours and technologies, including in cyberspace, suggest that there will be new order-sustaining rules for responsible actors to generate and maintain.

But decades on from Bull's analysis, it is not as if the international machinery has been changed root and branch. As Chris Brown (2004: 6) observed not so long ago, the main place where the special rights and responsibilities of the great powers are invested remains the United Nations Security Council. And if we looked there on 20 July 2015 we would find the Council giving unanimous approval to the resolution endorsing the Joint Comprehensive Agreement on Iran's Nuclear Program. This agreement, negotiated with Tehran by the five permanent members and Germany (P5+1), appeared to establish a new chapter in arms control. Holding the chair at this point was New Zealand, whose Foreign Minister Murray McCully 'said in his national capacity that the agreement represented a triumph of diplomacy and cooperation over confrontation and mistrust.' (UNSC, 2015).

Two traditions in New Zealand's foreign policy highlight the significance of McCully's observations. The first is Wellington's commitment to the networks of institutions, regimes and norms which comprise the much queried rules-based international order. But the second is New Zealand's doubts that the great powers can be relied on to protect and advance this multilateral order ahead of their own selfish interests. These strands unite in Wellington's longstanding concern that the veto rights of the great powers prevent the United Nations system from working as it might. This concern was reflected in a successful campaign for a temporary seat on the Council for the 2015-2016 term when New Zealand paraded its small state credentials and offered to help enliven the UN's often paralysed machinery.

Unfortunately for McCully's moment of optimism in New York, Resolution 2215 and the great power collaboration on Iran it embodied was an exception to the rule. By then a new era of great power irresponsibility had well and truly

emerged. Russia's emergence as a great irresponsible of the 21st century had become obvious in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and its destabilization of Eastern Ukraine. China's campaign of intimidation in the South China Sea (and East China Sea) was also evoking widespread dismay. These problems have not gone away in the years since. But there is even bigger news: Russia and China have been joined as great irresponsibles by the United States which has been turning its back on responsible global cooperation during Donald Trump's presidency.

This article explores the conjunction between this recent period of great power irresponsibility and New Zealand's expectations that all members of the international state system should meet their obligations to international order. It does so by considering New Zealand's efforts as a self-declared small and principled power to hold the great powers to account. With the arrival of a new coalition government under Jacinda Ardern's leadership in late 2017, New Zealand set its targets in this area even higher. Early the next year, in her first Prime Ministerial speech on foreign policy, Ardern (2018a) argued that:

'in this uncertain world, where long accepted positions have been met with fresh challenge –our response lies in the approach that, with rare exceptions, we have always taken. Speaking up for what we believe in, standing up when our values are challenged and working tirelessly to draw in partners with shared views.'

Ardern's standing up for values argument implied that National Party-led governments had been somewhat deficient in this respect. Specifically this criticism applied to the foreign policymaking of Ardern's two immediate predecessors; John Key (New Zealand's Prime Minister from 2008 to 2016); and Bill English (his successor from 2016 to 2017). Coming into power as the new coalition's leading player, the New Zealand Labour Party (2017) had campaigned on a foreign policy extolling a New Zealand 'which thinks independently, has strong values and, notwithstanding our small size, makes a significant contribution to the world community as a good international citizen...Our vision is for a world which is peaceful, secure, prosperous, democratic and socially just.'

The analysis below examines whether New Zealand has been living up to its own rhetoric about international responsibility under recent National-led and Labour-led coalition governments. It sets out the disorderly behaviour of each of the three great irresponsibles – firstly Russia, secondly China and thirdly the United States – and in each case considers New Zealand's response. The aim is to evaluate how determined Wellington has been to call out great power irresponsibility. The results of this study show periods of equivocation and slowness as well as moments of relative clarity and alacrity. Explanations for the variance in New Zealand's approach are also offered. These include the tension between New Zealand's various foreign policy goals, the changing comfort levels among its decision-makers for standing up at particular moments, and differences among the political parties which have comprised New Zealand's changing coalition governments.

Great Irresponsible Russia

A cursory look at the recent historical record will show that in the same year that Russia annexed Crimea and initiated a campaign resembling hybrid warfare against Ukraine, New Zealand registered its unhappiness in several public ways. First, in early March 2014, New Zealand withdrew from negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (Headley, 2019: 216-7). Anyone aware of the importance of the commercial dimension in New Zealand foreign policy and the particular attachment of John Key's government to expanding the basket of such agreements will know how rare that step was. Second, towards the end of the same month, McCully announced that New Zealand had imposed travel restrictions on a small number of Russians and Ukrainians believed to be connected to the developments in Ukraine. The Foreign Minister explained this measure as a significant act of unity with New Zealand's like-minded partners: 'Applying sanctions will position New Zealand alongside other members of the international community who have condemned the breach of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity' (McCully, 2014; Small, V., 2014).

That argument was reinforced a year later when New Zealand's Ministry of Defence released a public version of its 2014 *Defence Assessment*, prepared en route to a new Defence White Paper. The former argued that 'Russian actions in Ukraine are challenging the rules-based international order, particularly the inviolability of a country's national borders.' (NZ Ministry of Defence, 2014: 55). At a time of increasing international concern about the rules governing international behaviour, Russia was being pictured by Wellington as the main state challenger to international order. As ISIS was identified as the main non-state challenger, Putin's government was being placed in very unsavoury company.

But New Zealand's approach to Russia was more complicated than this simple read-out suggests. When he announced the travel restrictions of March 2014, McCully had called these measures 'modest and careful.' Four months later, many of New Zealand's traditional partners, including Australia, placed much more significant restrictions on Russia, reflecting continuing concern about Russia's actions in Ukraine and especially the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over territory held by Moscow-armed rebels. These steps included sanctions restricting access of Russia's state-owned banks to credit in EU countries and the United States.

In early August 2014 Russia reciprocated by banning food imports from these states. But New Zealand was on another list: one Russian Minister noted that his country would look to fill some of the gap with New Zealand cheese. (Radio New Zealand, 2014). The writer of an article for an online news outlet observed that 'Intriguingly, although Japan, New Zealand and Singapore have imposed some sanctions on Russia, they were not named in today's food import ban.' (Karaian, 2014). The reason was simple. New Zealand had joined in on the initial 'modest and careful' measures, and would later criticise Russia's veto at the Security

Council on a resolution on the MH17 incident. But Wellington had not joined many of its partners in imposing economic sanctions on Russia.

Technically speaking there is also a simple explanation for that omission. Without legislation allowing the government to impose autonomous sanctions (those not expressly mandated by the UNSC) New Zealand lacked the legal means to join in. Australia had overcome that gap by passing an autonomous sanctions bill in 2011. The following year McCully had noted that New Zealand was looking at introducing similar legislation (Young, A. 2012). But it would not be until May 2017 that the Autonomous Sanctions Bill would get its first (and so far, only) reading in the House of Representatives.

The Key government could hardly be accused of acting in an unseemly rush in this respect. One wonders if there were political limits as to how far New Zealand wanted to line up with Western partners given the longstanding preference for ideas of foreign policy independence. But there is evidence of restrictions of a more informal nature. One media report recorded comments by John Key at the end of 2014 which indicated that ‘although New Zealand has not officially imposed trade sanctions on Russia, government officials had called in Fonterra and other companies to ask them not to exploit the gap left in the Russian market.’ (Trevett, 2014).

It’s not entirely clear if there really was an opening: James Headley (2019: 218) suggests that Russia resorted imaginatively to phytosanitary restrictions on New Zealand imports to restrict access in any case. But one prominent New Zealand politician thought it was silly to miss out on new opportunities to sell primary products to Russia. In a parliamentary exchange in 2016, New Zealand First leader Winston Peters asked Key why he ‘denied farmers a chance to trade with the world’s second-biggest dairy importer, Russia.’ Peters went so far as to accuse the European Union of taking advantage of what he called New Zealand’s ‘informal sanctions.’ (NZ Parliament, 2016).

If National’s policy platform for the 2017 general election is any guide, English and his colleagues were open to the possibility of a return to trade talks with Russia (New Zealand National Party, 2017: 4). But in negotiating New Zealand First’s agreement with Labour which led to Ardern’s coalition government, Peters went one better in securing a commitment to ‘Work towards a Free Trade Agreement with the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union and initiate Closer Commonwealth Economic Relations’ (NZ House of Representatives, 2017: 6). This development earned a rare intervention from the local EU Ambassador whereupon Peters repeated his accusation that EU members were taking advantage of Russian market opportunities at New Zealand’s expense. The media report covering this unusual exchange indicated that “Peters declined to provide details or explain the significance of the EU-Russia trade he referred to.” (New Zealand Herald Staff, 2018).

By this time, Russia’s great power irresponsibility had outdone itself. Not only was the armed conflict with Ukraine unresolved. Moscow’s interference in Western democratic politics, not least in the 2016 US election, was proving a

significant breach of the very rules against upholding political sovereignty and rejecting interference to which Moscow often claimed fealty. In addition, Russia's military actions in Syria suggested that humanitarian concerns were of little concern in Putin's calculus.

But these would not be the issues that would test the new coalition government's approach to Russia. The catalyst came in the first week of March 2018 with news of the nerve agent poisoning in Britain of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence agent, and his daughter Yulia Skripal, in the United Kingdom. Speculation that the Putin government had ordered the poisoning was rampant by the time that Peters was giving a weekend television interview where he raised doubts about Russia's role in the MH17 downing and US election interference. Peters said that the government was 'deadly serious' about pursuing free trade talks with Russia and its custom union partners and castigated the EU and the UK for trading with Russia and cutting out New Zealand's agricultural market opportunities. (Satherly, 2018).

Two days later the Prime Minister decided to stand up for her Deputy, seemingly doubling down on his poorly timed trade comments. (Trevett, 2018). Events on the other side of the world were making the new government appear flat-footed. On the same day in the House of Commons, Theresa May (2018) announced that unless Russia quickly offered a convincing explanation for the poisoning of the Skripals, the UK would 'conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom.' Tracy Watkins (2018) reported that British diplomats had taken the very unusual step of briefing New Zealand journalists about May's statement. And by the middle of the month Radio New Zealand (2019a) was carrying a BBC report of the May government's decision to expel 23 Russian diplomats who had been identified as 'undeclared intelligence officers.'

The solidarity with Britain on this matter proved impressive. Within a fortnight there occurred a coordinated expulsion of Russian diplomats from at least 20 countries, including the many of London's European partners, the United States, Australia, and Canada (Dewan et al, 2018). But New Zealand was not on that list: the only five eyes member to be in that position. The old excuse about the absence of sanctions legislation would not fly on this occasion - although after an unusual intervention by the British High Commissioner, the Prime Minister had indicated that Free Trade Talks with Russia were now firmly off the agenda, reinforcing the informal sanctions that had been in place for some years (Watkins and Moir, 2018). The government's explanation of why it had not joined in the coordinated approach to diplomatic expulsions was quite special: Ardern and Peters said that New Zealand would expel spies if they could find them but none had been identified (Collins, P., 2018).

This episode reflects unfavourably for a Prime Minister who had claimed barely a year earlier that her government would be 'standing up when our values are challenged and working tirelessly to draw in partners with shared views.' The reputational damage was could not be undone entirely by a subsequent decision to ban from New Zealand the Russian diplomats who had been expelled by other

countries (Coughlan, 2018), by Ardern's expressions of solidarity the following month in a visit to the UK (Kirk, 2018), or by a statement from Peters (2018a) a month later that the government was 'deeply concerned' about the findings of an international investigation that the missile used in the attack on the MH17 came from a Russian infantry brigade.

That a firmer official position exists is clear in the most significant statement of the coalition government's external policies. The *Strategic Defence Policy Statement*, launched in July 2018 by Ron Mark, a New Zealand First colleague of Mr Peters, argues that:

'Russia has attempted to discredit Western democracy by challenging its "internal coherence," leveraging information operations, and exploiting existing fissures within Western societies. Russia also seeks to restore claimed historical levels of influence and its challenges to laws and norms in pursuit of a sphere of influence have at times been deniable and below thresholds for response, thus complicating approaches from states, NATO, and other regional and international organisations. In its bid for greater influence in former Soviet republics and further afield, Russia has challenged international laws and norms through a range of actions, including cyber-enabled information operations (from Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia through to social media campaigns that amplified political polarisation in the 2016 United States and United Kingdom elections) and use of military force' (NZ Government, 2018: 18).

This view is consistent with the line on Russia taken by the 2014 *Defence Assessment* (as quoted earlier in this section) which was produced during the second term of John Key's government. This makes it hard to pass off the comments in the 2018 *Defence Statement* as a rearguard attempt by the Ardern-led government to patch up its reputation for standing up to Russia. In fact the robust assessment in a document signed off by all Ministers around the Cabinet table brings into even sharper relief the shortcomings in the same government's messaging earlier in the year.

One is left concluding that there are at least two interlocking explanations for what happened in early 2018. The first is that the strong views on Russia of Foreign Minister Peters had an oversized impact on New Zealand's day-to-day rhetoric on Russia. The second is that the Prime Minister and her Labour colleagues lacked the capacity to see the problem for what it was and the processes to avoid the genie escaping from the bottle. New Zealand First had the portfolio and an experienced hand to run it. But Labour had very little bandwidth for the everyday business of foreign policy. Two of Labour's foreign affairs stalwarts, Phil Goff and David Shearer, were no longer in parliament, and the Ardern team's main focus was domestic policy.

Whatever the precise causes, in the Russian case, it must be said that New Zealand has not stood up consistently to great power irresponsibility. There are moments of relative firmness but also of significant softness. The inconsistency

is more pronounced in the Ardern-Peters era than in the Key-English period of New Zealand politics.

Great Irresponsible China

In light of Bull's advice that responsibility means avoiding the major use of violent force in interstate conduct, it seems problematic to label China as a second great irresponsible. The last time that the People's Liberation Army was used in armed conflict with another sovereign state was the 1979 limited war with Vietnam. And unlike Russia (in Syria) and the United States (in Iraq and elsewhere), China has avoided intervening militarily in the Middle East.

China has preferred to let its growing economic might do the talking. It has been an increasingly active player in the global trading system, and at least rhetorically, has supported international economic openness in the face of protectionist challenges. In the same early 2018 speech in which she announced that her government would stand up for New Zealand's values, Ardern listed China as a valuable partner in international efforts to promote an open trading system and deal with climate change. She thereby indicated that in at least these two policy areas, Wellington saw Beijing as lying inside the rules-based system. This was consistent with New Zealand's reluctance to use arguments about the rules-based order as sticks with which to beat Asia's main rising power: an approach often taken by the United States and Australia.

But when it comes to China's behaviour in the South China Sea, many of these criticisms have been justified. While Beijing has avoided the violent use of force in maritime Asia, it has nonetheless been changing facts on the ground giving itself *de facto* (but not legal) control of disputed territories. Working beneath the threshold of actual armed conflict, it has used PLA vessels and flotillas of auxiliary and fishing boats to intimidate less powerful Southeast Asian claimants. China has built up tiny features into larger artificial islands that now support airfields and radar stations. At the same time in the East China Sea, China has mounted a serious campaign of pressure on Japan on the Senkaku/Diayou islands that both countries claim as their own.

By the time that Russia had annexed Crimea in 2014, posing a direct threat to Europe's stability, in East Asia it had become clear that with Xi Jinping's rise to absolute power China was a more intimidating presence than under his immediate predecessors. In 2012, as the leadership transition was occurring in Beijing, Chinese vessels had barged their way onto the Scarborough Shoal at the expense of the Philippines. By the middle of 2014, a Chinese tug was using water cannons against Vietnamese vessels in contested waters near the Paracel islands.

In its 2014 *Defence Assessment* the Key government was content with identifying the problem without identifying its main source, suggesting that 'Attempts to lay claim to contested territory via regular patrolling, occupation of islands, and over-flights, increases the risks of minor clashes escalating into more serious conflict' (NZ Ministry of Defence, 2015: 38). And unlike its pessimistic assessment of Russia's international impact, the *Assessment* remained

comparatively upbeat on China's growing power, arguing that 'New Zealand and Australia also share a common interest in the peaceful accommodation of China's rise within the existing rules-based international order.' (NZ Ministry of Defence, 2015:32).

While the *Assessment* argued that the two allies had argued 'for the peaceful resolution of maritime boundary disputes in the East and South China Seas' (NZ Ministry of Defence, 2015:32), they had also been adopting different views in different company. In 2013, following China's abrupt and unilateral declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea (which would, in theory, require vessels and aircraft travelling through that area to notify China in advance), Australia joined the United States, Japan and other regional partners in a fairly well coordinated voice of protest. But New Zealand remained quiet on the issue. Instead in an awkward interview Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman explained that the trip to China he was embarking on was designed to 'balance out our diplomacy with the United States.' New Zealand was, he said, 'walking this path between the US and China' (quoted in A. Young, 2013).

Here geopolitical calculations of a different sort had intruded – the desire to reaffirm New Zealand's reputation for autonomy in relations involving the great powers. This was one factor encouraging a *sotto voce* approach even as the Key government found itself unable to resist calls for saying more on China's troubling approach to maritime territorial disputes. For example, in June 2014 McCully explained to parliament's Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade select committee that events in the South China Sea were of 'great importance to New Zealand' and had 'the potential to undermine regional and maritime security.' He also explained that New Zealand did not 'take a position on the particular claims in the South China Sea,' and encouraged 'all parties to exercise restraint and avoid actions that could inflame the situation.' These cautious statements were unlikely to set off feverish claims that New Zealand was now specifically calling out China for bad behaviour. But in a sign of continuing risk aversion, McCully's comments were not made available to a wider public audience and had to be transcribed privately by the present author from a recording made by the Select Committee Office.

Gradually, however, the Key government was more willing to acknowledge the inevitable and became more transparent about its concerns. Speaking in China to a PLA audience, Defence Minister Brownlee (2015) called for 'an open and inclusive regional order where security, freedom of navigation, and overflight, and open trade routes are managed in accordance with international laws and norms.' In early 2016 John Key and Australia's Malcolm Turnbull issued a joint Prime Ministerial statement which 'stressed the importance of unimpeded trade, freedom of navigation and overflight' and called on 'all claimant states in the South China Sea to halt land reclamation, construction, and militarisation, and to take steps to ease tensions' (Key, 2016). Two months later, as David Capie (2016) notes, McCully joined the act with speeches in Australia and Singapore. In the second of these, New Zealand's Foreign Minister made his most pointed remarks to date, criticising as a 'a cause of heightened tension reclamation and construction activity and deployment of military assets in disputed areas.'

(McCully, 2016a).

That New Zealand was beginning to hit a nerve in Beijing became clear when Key visited China in April 2016. Waiting for him were opinion pieces in leading state-owned newspapers implying ever so politely that if New Zealand wanted an upgraded Free Trade Agreement it would need to learn the virtues of silence on South China Sea issues (Johnson, 2016). China appeared to be taking advantage of the reality reflected in an important line from New Zealand's 2014 *Defence Assessment*: 'As New Zealand's largest trading partner the bilateral relationship with China is one of our most important' (NZ Ministry of Defence, 2015: 41).

This change raises interesting questions about why the National-led government had taken a much quieter approach in the preceding period. As Brady (2019: 137) and Köllner (2019: 14,22) argue, the most obvious answer is New Zealand's trading interests, which were uppermost for a government whose foreign policy had a strong commercial focus (J. Young, 2017: 519-523). But there are other potential explanations. One is that New Zealand wished to steer clear of US-China rivalry and avoid being seen as a member of an anti-China coalition. Another may have been a judgement that despite what was happening in the South China Sea, in overall terms Beijing was a positive factor in world affairs. It is clear that John Key continues to hold those views today. For example in November 2018 he said that 'I think Xi Jinping's going to go down in history as a good leader of China' (quoted in O'Sullivan, 2018a).

But this does not explain why the National-led government became *more* willing to call China out for its troubling behaviour in maritime East Asia. One explanation is that developments in the region were becoming far too obvious to ignore. By the time that McCully (2016a) said that he was 'pleased to hear President Xi Jinping's commitment last year that China would not militarise new features' in the South China Sea it was already possible to see that Xi's promise (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015) was at odds with China's actions. And coverage of the gap between rhetoric and action would only intensify (Asia Maritime Transparency Institute, 2016).

Moreover, in July 2016 Beijing rejected the finding of an arbitral tribunal against its approach in the South China Sea and in favour of the Philippines which had brought the case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration. New Zealand's response may have been the diplomatic equivalent of a damp sponge (McCully, 2016b). But Wellington had made its position clear on the validity of the arbitration process in the 2016 *Defence White Paper* which endorsed 'the rights of states to seek recourse to international dispute settlement through international institutions, as well as solving disputes through direct negotiations' (NZ Government, 2016: 31). By this time the Key government seemed to be playing catch-up. The same *White Paper* noted that China's Air Defence Identification Zone declaration (all the way back in 2013) had affected regional perceptions of freedom of overflight in the East China Sea (NZ Government, 2016: 35).

At the same time National-led governments probably felt insulated in making more noise on China's misbehavior by their commitment to stronger links in

other dimensions of a still growing relationship. For example, under Key's leadership New Zealand had been an early joiner of China's Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (Huang, 2015; J. Young, 2017: 524-5), an institution whose establishment caused severe consternation in Washington. Despite its concerns about the South China Sea, the 2016 *Defence White Paper* named China as 'an important strategic partner for New Zealand,' noting New Zealand's development assistance relationship with China in the South Pacific (NZ Government, 2016: 33). And in March 2017, along with new bilateral initiatives in trade and climate change cooperation, Prime Minister English (2017a) signed a non-binding memorandum of agreement with Premier Li Keqiang on China's Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative.

One skeptic of New Zealand's precocious engagement with the BRI was Winston Peters. Six months before the 2017 general election that would propel his party into a governing coalition with Ardern's Labour Party, the New Zealand First leader argued that Pacific countries were unlikely to see much commercial advantage from China's investment. (Radio New Zealand, 2017). Not long after he became Foreign Minister Peters visited Australia where he explained the new government's commitment of extra resources in the Pacific as a consequence of concerns that New Zealand and its Western partners were losing ground to new players and needed to 'better pool our energies and resources to maintain our relative influence' (Peters, 2018b). Everyone knew he was talking about China (O'Sullivan, 2018b).

Fresh momentum was also occurring in defence policy, another New Zealand First portfolio. During the election campaign defence spokesperson Ron Mark had presented an especially robust line on military spending (at least in a New Zealand context). As Minister he explained that New Zealand's armed services 'require military functions to carry out their warlike functions.' (TVNZ, 2018). He would then use the government's *Defence Strategic Policy Statement* to pave the way for the purchase of new Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft. And the *Statement* is especially noteworthy for containing the strongest set of official New Zealand views on China's behaviour in maritime East Asia in the Xi era. The relevant portion is worth quoting in full:

'China uses a broad set of levers in pursuit of its external interests, including in pursuit of its territorial claims. In 2013, China declared an Air Defence Identification Zone in disputed areas of the East China Sea, and more recently China's air force has publicised the landing of several long-range bombers, including nuclear-capable aircraft, on features in the South China Sea. China also uses military, coast guard, and fisheries to act in support of its maritime claims. Notably, China has created and extended multiple artificial island features in the Spratly and Paracel Islands upon which it has constructed bases. These posts now feature new radar and communications arrays, airstrips and hangars, deep water harbours, and weapons systems, which provide China with the ability to quickly deploy a range of additional capabilities in and around key international shipping lanes' (NZ Government, 2018: 20).

The comparison with the previous government's language is instructive, including a new willingness to highlight China's militarisation of artificial features. This did not mean that Wellington had given up on China's ability to contribute to an open and cooperative international system. The *Statement* argues that China was 'deeply integrated into the rules-based order' and had 'invested in its institutions and accrued significant benefits from free access to the commons and economic openness.' But in a noticeable point of difference from earlier optimism, the *Statement* also argued that 'as China has integrated into the international order, it has not consistently adopted the governance and values championed by the order's traditional leaders. Both domestically and as a basis for international engagement, China holds views on human rights and freedom of information that stand in contrast to those that prevail in New Zealand' (NZ Government, 2018: 17).

The Pushback Widens

In subsequent months the Ardern government would publically indicate concerns about other aspects of China's international behaviour. For example at the end of 2018 New Zealand placed China alongside North Korea and Russia on the short list of countries it was willing to name for supporting damaging cyber activities. New Zealand's signals intelligence agency stated that China's Ministry of State Security was connected to a campaign of activities which 'targeted the intellectual property and commercial data of a number of global managed service providers, some operating in New Zealand.' The New Zealand Government Communications Security Bureau (2018a) explained that these actions ran 'counter to the commitment all APEC economies, including China, had made in November 2016' to 'not conduct or support ICT-enabled theft of intellectual property or other confidential business information, for commercial advantage.'

Thus ended the tradition of not publically identifying China, which had become New Zealand's leading trading partner, as a danger to the integrity of vital information systems. And it was almost inevitable that this move would add fuel to arguments that Wellington was siding with its traditional security partners against Beijing. Certainly another decision in the second half of 2018 easily gave that impression: New Zealand said no to a local company, Spark, which wanted to include the Chinese conglomerate Huawei in its bid for the nation-wide 5G internet upgrade.

The official explanation focused on the requirements based in domestic legislation. GCSB Director Andrew Hampton indicated that Spark's initial bid had been rejected because 'a significant network security risk was identified' (NZ Government Communications Security Bureau, 2018b) and the responsible Minister Andrew Little said that New Zealand's decision was about the technology not the supplier (Pullar-Strecker et al, 2018). But these accounts were no match for the argument that New Zealand was taking sides in a growing geopolitical contest (Smyth and White, 2018). After all, Australia had already blocked Huawei from 5G involvement, and the United States had been warning other governments on the dangers of working with Chinese telecommunications

firms. National Party Leader Simon Bridges (who had taken over from Bill English) indicated that the Ardern government had 'overseen a deterioration in New Zealand's relationship with China.' Describing Huawei as 'one of the best in the business,' Bridges said he had seen 'no smoking gun' to indicate that New Zealand should follow Australia's lead (Radio New Zealand, 2018).

In other words, a Labour-led government was now vulnerable to the argument that it was leading New Zealand away from foreign policy independence, which had so often been code for creating distance from Washington. In fact Ron Mark had already put a new spin on this idea in noting that New Zealand's criticisms of China's behaviour in the previous year's *Defence Statement* were a mark of New Zealand's 'independence of mind' (quoted in Sachdeva, 2018).

This makes it difficult to disentangle New Zealand's response to China's irresponsibility from its calculation of the play of alliance-type relations with traditional partners. In July 2019 Mark showed that it was possible to downplay both motivations. At the same venue where Brownlee's remarks in 2016 on the South China Sea had given rise to criticism from Beijing (Blanchard, 2016), Mark (2019) referred to China as a 'key strategic partner for New Zealand.' While emphasising the importance of the rules-based order, the Defence Minister avoided any notion that China was a challenger to aspects of it: 'New Zealand and China, together with many other countries in our region and around the world, have benefited from the rules-based order. We have also made significant contributions to it.'

Even more importantly, Labour leaders appear to have been wary should the pendulum swing too far in the negative direction on China. Köllner (2019:22) suggests that Ardern 'effectively took charge of China policy in spring 2019, seeking to stabilize bilateral ties and ward off possible economic damage.' In a May 2019 speech in which he noted that China was New Zealand's 'largest trading partner, largest source of overseas students, and second-largest source of overseas visitors', Trade Minister David Parker told his Chinese business audience that there was 'much to be gained by working with China on critical international issues such as climate change, regional security, open markets and the rules-based multilateral trading system' (Parker, 2019). It can only be expected that the future remarks of Labour Ministers will be peppered with references to the government's successful completion of negotiations with China for an upgraded FTA which Ardern and Parker (2019) announced during the East Asia Summit in Thailand.

But it is still important to wonder if all of this reflects a deliberate adjustment of an important relationship as opposed to inconsistent messaging. This is relevant when we consider the Ardern government's willingness to call out China on human rights issues. As these problems relate largely to domestic conduct they might seem distant from the attitudes to international order that preoccupied Bull's assessment of great power irresponsibility. But major violations of civil liberties cannot but affect a country's international reputation for responsible conduct. This is important given credible reports of more than a million Uighur

people being placed in detention facilities in Xinjiang which have drawn critical attention to Beijing's human rights record.

Laura Walters (2019a) has reported that as New Zealand officials grew increasingly concerned about the situation in Xinjiang, Ardern raised New Zealand's concerns with Chinese leaders on several occasions in late 2018. Likewise on a brief visit to Beijing in April 2019, Ardern indicated that she had raised the issue in private with Xi Jinping (Young, A, 2019). But these efforts remained in line with the "quiet diplomacy" approach practiced assiduously by John Key (and a number of his predecessors). While this suits a status conscious Beijing, it makes it difficult for observers to know quite what New Zealand has been willing, and unwilling, to say to China on human rights (Fitzgerald, 2019).

A more public reflection of Wellington's views would eventually come. In the middle of 2019, New Zealand joined a letter sent by 22 countries (mainly from Europe but also including Australia, Canada and Japan) to the United Nations Human Rights Council raising concerns about China's detention practices. When news of this letter's existence and New Zealand's support for it became public (Human Rights Watch, 2019), journalists then had an opportunity to ask about New Zealand's rationale. When faced with such a question following a meeting with his Australian counterpart, Peters gave a terse but nonetheless important reply: 'Because we believe in human rights' (quoted in Jancic, 2019).

On its own this is an important moment. Then there is Peters' response to a remarkable interview given in China in September 2019 by Simon Bridges which lavished praise on the Communist Party of China and its achievements (Bateman, 2019). The New Zealand First leader drew an obvious contrast between China and New Zealand's belief in 'the rule of law, believes in protection - not persecution by government... reason, fairness and equality (quoted in Small, Z. 2019).' These differences had garnered fresh attention the previous month when the Ardern government warned China against attempts to constrict the freedom of expression among New Zealand-based university students involved in debates over developments in Hong Kong (Walters, 2019b). Moreover, in November 2019, it became known that New Zealand had signed a further letter sent by two dozen countries to the UN Human Rights Council expressing concerns about China's detention practices in Xinjiang (Wells, 2019).

But signs of inconsistency surface on closer examination. For example, in the first weeks of the new government Peters queried the priorities of critics of China's human rights record: 'Sometimes the West and commentators in the West should have a little more regard to that and the economic outcome for those people,' he said 'rather than constantly harping on about the romance of "freedom," or as famous singer Janis Joplin once sang in her song: "freedom is just another word for nothing else to lose"' (quoted in Cooke, 2017). This sentiment certainly gained international attention (Richardson, 2017). In case it might be considered an isolated ad lib comment, it bears comparison to Peters' rejection three months later of arguments that New Zealand should not be pursuing a free trade relationship with Russia on human rights grounds: 'I'm talking about trade as a separate area otherwise if we have become so

judgmental and so moral about everything, we would not be trading with anybody' (quoted in Trevett, 2018).

Notwithstanding these inconsistencies, in overall terms the Ardern government has been more willing than its National-led predecessors to call out China's great power irresponsibility. There seem to be at least four contributing factors. First, as it was for the era which preceded it, China's behaviour had become even more troubling. The developments in the South China Sea and the cyber realm are obvious examples, as is international coverage of the mass detention in Xinjiang. Yet this *external* explanation can only be part of the answer. There were many opportunities for the Key and English governments to speak up as China's behaviour became more problematic, but only in some cases were these opportunities taken.

This gives rise to a second explanation: that the Ardern-Peters coalition government has brought political leaders into office in New Zealand with a greater willingness to speak up about China's behaviour. There is the Prime Minister's emphasis on New Zealand standing up for its values which can be contrasted with the previous government's stronger emphasis on New Zealand's commercial interests. Then there is Deputy Prime Minister Peters' track record of scepticism about foreign investment and immigration which has sometimes tapped into anti-China sentiment (Collins, S., 2017).

One embarrassing intervention by Andrew Little in 2015 shows that Labour was not immune from these impulses (Trevett, 2015). But care is needed here because of the difference between views of China's behaviour as a state and views about Chinese nationals as migrants and investors. Quite how and whether these domestic sentiments have shaped New Zealand's foreign and defence policy is difficult to establish. What we can say is that the new coalition includes some leaders who seem less willing to take a generally positive outlook on China than some of their predecessors. This is probably reinforced by concerns about China's policies held by the Greens (Brady, 2019: 139), who hold several Ministerial portfolios.

A third factor is the view in parts of New Zealand's public sector that the Key-English governments had not given sufficient weight to the more troubling aspects of China's behaviour. That frustration seems to have found a more receptive audience among leading Cabinet figures in the Ardern-Peters era. As these views have been taken up, the locus of New Zealand's official assessment of China may have shifted within the bureaucracy. In comparative terms, the trade negotiation perspective favoured under National is less dominant and more room has been given to the concerns about China that exist in parts of New Zealand's national security community. This shift is reflected in some of the issues which New Zealand has been expressing concern about publically including China's approach to regional security in the South China Sea and to cybersecurity.

Fourth, there is also the possibility of changes in wider public opinion about China which have been reflected in the Ardern government's positioning. In

recent years local media outlets have covered claims of China's influence attempts on New Zealand's domestic politics (Nippert and Fisher, 2017). Many of these accounts have drawn on an internationally prominent report by Canterbury University's Anne-Marie Brady (2017), and have helped draw attention to a parliamentary select committee investigation into foreign political interference. These claims have become a particular challenge for the Ardern governments's main rival: the National Party (Walters, 2019c).

A livelier and more contentious debate on China does not mean that a universally hostile view of the People's Republic has emerged in New Zealand. But the number of New Zealanders who seem concerned about China's friendliness appears to be growing. A survey conducted by the Asia New Zealand Foundation (2019: 45) suggests that between 2017 and 2018 the percentage of New Zealanders who consider China a threat rose from 18% to 32%. This is still well below the figures for Russia and North Korea (50% and 62% respectively in 2018), and only just above the figure for the United States (26% in 2018) but the figures on China are still noteworthy.

Working out the respective influence of these factors is challenging. Moreover, if they have combined to encourage a stronger New Zealand view on China's great power irresponsibility since Ardern took office, why have they not got in the way of occasions since late 2017 which have suggested a more accommodating stance? One possibility is that some of the same political arrangements associated with the strengthening of New Zealand's positioning have also been responsible for some of the inconsistency. Having the Foreign Affairs and Defence portfolios held by New Zealand First Ministers (Peters and Mark) who are confident in their own convictions is one thing. But they have been given extra space to act on these ideas given Labour's lack of political bandwidth on external issues.

The United States Makes it Three: the Trump Effect

This has meant that any interventions on foreign policy by the Prime Minister herself gain added importance. And in the same February 2018 foreign policy speech which placed China inside the rules-based system on climate change and international trade policy, Ardern noted that the Trump Administration's position on these two big issues had disappointed New Zealand.

In that address Ardern drew explicitly on the legacies of her Labour Prime Ministerial predecessors. These included Helen Clark, whose government opposed the George W. Bush Administration's decision to invade Iraq without due cause or specific Security Council authorisation. And they included David Lange, who led New Zealand's challenge against the Reagan Administration's nuclear policies, initiating the celebrated limitations on port visits by nuclear capable warships which culminated in New Zealand's exclusion from active alliance relations with the United States.

As the older example coincided with the renewal of Cold War nuclear competition bemoaned by Bull, one might ask whether yesterday's America is

actually more deserving of the irresponsibility badge. The 2003 Iraq invasion, moreover, was an egregious example of the military interventions that Bull criticised. By comparison, President Trump argues that the United States needs to wrap up its long wars. He has shown a very limited appetite for competing with Russia's military actions in the Middle East, and the United States has continued to show relative restraint in opposing China's coercion in the South China Sea.

This raises the possibility that in labeling the United States as a third great irresponsible, this article is holding Washington to higher expectations of foreign conduct than the other two. But this might not seem unreasonable for those who believe that the United States has a special responsibility for promoting international rules and institutions. Indeed, in hoping to rely on a steadfast Washington in the face of challenges from Russia and China, close partners of the United States have been particularly sensitive to changes under Trump.

New Zealand had a special reason to be sensitive about Trump who had promised to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, regarded by Wellington as an essential building block towards a wider free trade area in the Asia-Pacific. The task of dealing with this opening challenge fell to Bill English whose short premiership coincided with the first 10 months of the Trump era of US foreign policy. English (2017b) settled on a relatively pragmatic response, noting that while New Zealand was 'disappointed' with this decision where the United States was spurning an important leadership opportunity, it was for the remaining members to push the agreement forward to completion.

It might be convenient to treat this as a challenge to New Zealand's interests in trade-enhanced prosperity rather than as an obvious episode of great power irresponsibility. But as the months wore on it was clear that Trump was raising broader challenges to the international system of rules safeguarding a relatively open trading system. Of particular concern were the challenges being posed to the dispute resolution system of the World Trade Organisation, arguably the most important international institution besides the UN itself in the eyes of New Zealand policymakers. Further signs of Trump's assault on multilateralism were evident in the middle of 2017 with the announcement that Washington would no longer actively participate in the Paris Climate Change accord.

Each one of these moves (and there were others too) would have provided an opportunity for Bill English's government to sound the alarms. But the pushback would come on a matter more closely related to the use for force attitudes that concerned Hedley Bull. In an August 2017 attempt to outdo Kim Jong Un's outlandish statements of coercive intent, Donald Trump infamously stated that any further North Korean threats on the United States would 'be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.' The nuclear connotations involved in such a threat generated a diplomatic but clear response from New Zealand's leader who said he was 'worried that those comments are not helpful when the situation's so tense and I think you're seeing reaction from North Korea that indicates that kind of comment's more likely to escalate than to settle things' (TV1 News, 2017). At a time when many of America's partners and allies were

still pulling their punches, English's response became the stuff of media headlines internationally (Hjelmgaard, 2017; France 24, 2017). But this moment stands out against a generally more cautious approach to Trump's style during a brief period of Prime Ministerial office.

This brevity makes any comparison to the significantly longer Ardern era somewhat unfair. But it might be argued that like English before her, New Zealand's second youngest premier has provided one especially noticeable moment of taking Trump's irresponsibility to task. In July 2019, Trump melted twitter by suggesting that four Democratic congresswomen should 'go back and help fix the totally broken crime infested places from which they came.' In a radio interview Ardern joined a growing chorus of protest against the racist intolerance that shone through in the President's incendiary language: 'Usually I don't get into other people's politics,' she cautioned, 'but it will be clear to most people that I completely and utterly disagree with him.' Drawing a contrast with her views on New Zealand domestic politics, Ardern insisted that 'never should a judgement be made about the origin of anyone, and their right therefore to be in Parliament as a representative' (quoted in Radio New Zealand, 2019b).

This response had a particular and tragic backdrop: just four months earlier New Zealand had its first experience of a terrorist mass shooting when an Australian citizen living in the South Island shot scores of worshippers at a Christchurch mosque, of whom more than 50 would lose their lives. An important part of Ardern's response to this tragedy was to draw a distinction between the hateful and divisive motives of white nationalism and New Zealand's identity as a welcoming, tolerant, multicultural country. That this invoked a different set of values to those promoted by Trump and other populist nationalists was not lost on American audiences (Kuruville, 2019). When asked what help she had asked from Trump in a phone call soon after the Christchurch shootings, Ardern said her suggestion had been 'Sympathy and love for all Muslim communities' (quoted in Cooke, 2019).

For the most part, Ardern has drawn implicit rather than direct contrasts with the less responsible aspects of Trump's agenda. For example, in an address to the United Nations General Assembly, Ardern (2018b) suggested that: 'In the face of isolationism, protectionism, racism – the simple concept of looking outwardly and beyond ourselves, of kindness and collectivism, might just be as good a starting point as any.' Ardern left no doubt where that collective action was most needed, arguing that 'not since the inception of the United Nations has there been a greater example of the importance of collective action and multilateralism, than climate change.'

These comments stood in clear contrast to the philosophy evoked by Donald Trump's earlier statement to the same body. Referring to 'global governance' as one of many 'threats to sovereignty' Trump encouraged other countries to 'reject the ideology of globalism.' Making no mention of climate change, Trump noted that the United States had withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council and would have no dealings with the International Criminal Court (The White House, 2018). New Zealand's Prime Minister did not need to mention that her comments

were a rebuke of Trump's damaging version of unilateralism: commentators were only too happy to do so (Rahim, 2018).

But when taken to the nth degree, the indirect approach can have its limitations. The Ardern government's major statement of defence policy notes the appearance of a body of opinion reflecting 'an inward focus' which is 'openly skeptical – and sometimes hostile – to elements of the international order, including economic openness.' While the statement then acknowledges that 'Uncertainty about the future international role of the United States has disruptive implications' (NZ Government, 2018: 18), the Trump Administration's role as the main Western cheerleader for attacks on multilateralism is not highlighted. Indeed the authors of the statement seem unable to know quite how to place the United States, often preferring the umbrella term of New Zealand's five eyes partners.

In comparison to the Statement's concerted treatment of China the United States is let off very lightly. But this comparison may have its own explanation: to the extent that China is seen as the more significant challenge to New Zealand's security interests, especially in the South Pacific, it is still important to put out a welcome mat to the United States, warts and all. This is evident in a subsequent *Defence Assessment* on New Zealand's South Pacific defence policy published in October 2019 which argues that 'the pace, intensity, and scope of engagement by external actors, who may not always reflect our values across their activities, are at the heart of a growing sense of geostrategic competition that is animating many nations' renewed focus on the Pacific' (NZ Government, 2019: 7). It is obvious that China is the concern here. And New Zealand's response puts a premium on sustaining close relationships with 'like-minded partners' including the United States, despite Washington's antagonism to multilateral cooperation on climate change which the Assessment acknowledges is an existential crisis for many Pacific Island countries.

On some occasions, there has been a distinct effort to underplay concerns about US behaviour for the sake of apparently greater worries about China, especially in New Zealand's neighbourhood. In December 2018 Peters used an address at Georgetown University to 'unashamedly ask for the United States to engage more' in the Pacific because it was in America's 'vital interests to do so.' The reason was something that only China's role could explain: 'the asymmetries at play in the region at a time when larger players are renewing their interest in the Pacific, with an attendant element of strategic competition' (Peters, 2018c). The following year Peters would return to these concerns in front of another audience in Washington, DC, noting that 'foundational democratic values' were 'increasingly being challenged in the Pacific.' Nowhere could be detected any concern that Trump's Presidency was an affront to some of these same values: instead the United States was praised as one of New Zealand's 'like-minded partners' with a 'shared advocacy for democratic values and norms' (Peters, 2019).

It is easy to be struck by the potential inconsistency between the public messages delivered by Ardern and Peters in (and to) the United States. The

Prime Minister confirmed that she had not seen a draft of what Mr Peters was preparing to say in the first of these speeches (Smellie, 2018; Köllner, 16). The Foreign Minister's approach reflects his long-standing enthusiasm for deeper US-NZ relations and for geopolitical logic that sees the United States as an essential regional balancer in light of China's rise. But this creates a gap with Ardern's attempts to indicate that Washington's great power conduct has become increasingly erratic and irresponsible.

This means that while New Zealand has taken a stronger line on the Trump Administration's problematic approach than was the case under Ardern's immediate predecessors, the inconsistencies have also become more pronounced. The latter are partly a function of the personal preferences of key actors, each trying to carve out a distinct political niche. In one corner there is the values-based reputation that Ardern has built internationally for her premiership, and where, at least in theory, the United States can be held to account independently of any concerns about China. In the other corner is Peters' geopolitical logic which sees the United States, with or without Trump, as a recipe for geopolitical stability as China rises.

But the inconsistency is also a function of where we are in the evolution of American foreign policy. Trump has done enough to frustrate any expectations of US great power responsibility for the duration of his presidency. But the jury may still be out on whether he is the embodiment of something much more permanent. Indeed, Trump's personalisation of US foreign policy also means that one has to ask how much the world is responding to an irresponsible leader as much as it is to an irresponsible great power. Of course the more the US policy machinery is forced to catch up with the 45th President, the more these become one and the same.

Conclusion: A Comparison

This article has been written to evaluate New Zealand's responses to the three great irresponsibles whose conduct shapes today's international environment. It does this by comparing New Zealand's approach under John Key and Bill English to the approach under Jacinda Ardern, which, as we have seen, also means factoring in the impact of Winston Peters.

But some qualifications about that comparison need to be noted. We do not know, for example, how a National Party-led government under Bill English would have responded to the Skripal poisoning by Russian agents because English was unable to form such a government after the 2017 general election. This article cannot make comparisons of responses to the same phenomena in the same time period. It makes them between different, although consecutive, periods. Moreover any conclusions from these comparisons need to be about general tendencies. Minor deviations are to be expected and not too much should be taken from them.

With these caveats in mind, what conclusions are possible? The overall findings are presented in Table One. The most obvious contrast is that New Zealand's

willingness to point out its concerns about China's irresponsibility has been stronger under Ardern than it was under Key and English. On Russia, it is reasonable to conclude that the reverse applies: New Zealand was more willing to raise concerns about Moscow's irresponsibility under Key and English, (and to act on these concerns) notwithstanding the gap between New Zealand's position and the more strenuous response from some of its traditional partners. This leaves the United States case as a tiebreaker. For analytical purposes it would be have been useful to have had a longer period of National-led responses to the Trump Administration's internationally irresponsible choices. Yet if we focus on Prime Minister Ardern's emphasis on tolerance, inclusion, and cooperation in the face of Trump's divisive messaging, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that her government has been more willing in general terms to raise concerns about US decision-making.

Table One: Comparing New Zealand Government Responses

	Russia	China	US
Compared to Key-English, Ardern-Peters govt. is:	Weaker and less consistent	Stronger but less consistent	Stronger but less consistent
Compared to Ardern-Peters, Key-English govts. were:	Stronger and more consistent	Weaker but more consistent	Weaker but more consistent

When it comes to the question of consistency, the advantage goes to Key and English. For example, National-led governments may have taken a long time to note New Zealand's displeasure over China's behaviour in the South China Sea, but when this happened it arrived in steady, if modest, increments. Under Ardern and Peters, New Zealand's approach on China has been bolder but inconsistencies have also been more obvious. In fact it has not always been clear whether an agreed position is in play, an issue that becomes apparent when comparing Prime Ministerial and Deputy Prime Ministerial views on the United States.

This is a reminder that the coalition factor is important. In the Key-English era, the National Party had a clear, unobstructed run on foreign policy. It held all the relevant portfolios as well as the Prime Ministership. Since the end of 2017, New Zealand has had a government in which the lead party (Labour) has the Prime Ministership but a smaller coalition member (New Zealand First) has two of the most important portfolios: Foreign Affairs and Defence. These arrangements have accentuated the influence of the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Mr Peters, a wily political operator with strong views. His views have undoubtedly been a factor behind some of the variations in New Zealand's response to the Trump Administration's foreign policy and in the topsy-turvy approach to Russia. They also explain at least some of the inconsistency in New Zealand's approach to China.

On the whole, there is some merit to the argument that under Jacinda Ardern's government New Zealand has been more willing to stand up and call out the

great irresponsibles. Two of the three cases considered in this article bear this out. But given the different finding on Russia, and the greater inconsistency in the Ardern era across the three cases, this answer is less decisive than might have been anticipated when Labour became the leading party in the new government. After all, Prime Minister Ardern promised to make standing up for New Zealand's values a feature of her government's approach. Had that promise been delivered in full, a more decisive contrast with the Key-English era of New Zealand foreign policy would have resulted from the type of inquiry made here. So has New Zealand has been standing up more firmly to the great irresponsibles? To some of them, yes, but only some of the time.

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