

Title: 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

Keywords: Security, Small states, Asia Pivot, Strategic ambiguity, Rules-based order

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