

Small state Realpolitik: Why New Zealand has reined in criticising human rights abuses in China and Turkey

Why has New Zealand, a liberal democracy avowedly championing human rights, only selectively denounced abuses in Asia and elsewhere? While censuring repression in Myanmar and North Korea, it refused to join its Five Eyes security partners Canada, Australia, the US and UK in criticising China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims and Hong Kong pro-democracy protests in 2021. New research examining how New Zealand muted its once full-throated rebuke of atrocities by two non-democracies—Turkey and China—assembles clues from 150 years of official and media documents.

Bilateral relations with China have reversed since the People's Republic of China (PRC) loomed large as a Cold War spectre and Korean War aggressor. New Zealand first bandwagoned with the West, supporting rival Taiwanese occupancy of the UN's China seat and recognising the PRC only after Taiwan's ouster in 1971. But the 1970s and 1980s were a pivot point. Global shifts since New Zealand's export mainstay, the UK, entered the European Economic Community, necessitated finding new markets, just as China began its transition to a market economy. Indeed, even while the Prime Minister condemned the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, Parliamentary debates stayed focused on China's trade allure.

New Zealand beat other Western democracies to "Four Firsts" with China, the watershed being signing the 2008 Free Trade Agreement. China became, and remains, its biggest trade partner, and official critiques all but halted. To the chagrin of New Zealand's "Five eyes" security partners, both major parties have sidestepped calling incarceration of Uyghurs in patriotic education facilities "genocide". In the latter period of the Ardern Labour government, with economic dependence on China becoming more fraught, the foreign minister recommended businesses diversify, without advocating divestment.

Reversals regarding Turkey likewise pivoted on seeking new markets but with less long-term economic success. But with an extra narrative of World War I enemies-turned-friends,

New Zealand governments since have airbrushed both the Armenian genocide, which it acknowledged and denounced from the 1880s to 1919, and ongoing violent anti-democratic acts thereafter. And has hardly criticized more contemporary violations of human rights. But in New Zealand's pursuit of trading partners and for recognition at Gallipoli where the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) had fallen in 1915, Wellington unveiled a monument to the Kemal Atatürk—who continued annihilating the Indigenous populations of the region, including Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians. Minor parties still criticise Turkey for repressing its Kurdish community, and New Zealand Armenian citizens and occasionally media challenge genocide denial.

On a pure, values-based, "shared institutions" theory of liberalism, New Zealand would have followed the liberal democratic club, especially its security partners, and consistently denounced rights abuses in both states. By selective denunciation, governments have played a subtler "two-level game", minimising adverse effects abroad but serving voters' economic bottom lines at home. New Zealand's government (and voters) may care about human rights, of course, but tend to speak out only when costs are low. For New Zealand, pursuing an independent foreign policy means maintaining cultural and security ties to one set of partners (the US, UK, Australian, Canada) while deepening commercial ties to others (i.e. China). This trend holds true even amid authoritarian turns—and fresh allegations of human rights abuses—in President Xi's China and Erdoğan's Turkey in recent years.

The full study results are available in an article authored by Maria Armoudian and Stephen Noakes: "The Realpolitik of small states: explaining New Zealand's silence on human rights violations in Turkey (Türkiye) and China". *Political Science* 75(2) 85-104 (2023). DOI: 10.1080/00323187.2023.2248990