

Cook Islands

Cook Islands' 'strategic' deal with China angers New Zealand

Agreement with south Pacific archipelago deepens concerns about Beijing's influence in region



Avarua, capital of the Cook Islands, a south Pacific archipelago with a population of about 15,000 © Rafael Ben Ari/Dreamstime

Nic Fildes in Melbourne 10 HOURS AGO

The Cook Islands will this week sign a strategic agreement with China, in a move that has rattled the south Pacific country's traditional partner New Zealand and deepened concerns about Beijing's influence in the region.

Mark Brown, the archipelago's prime minister, will travel to China on Monday for a state visit and to sign a "comprehensive strategic partnership" that will cover everything from trade and tourism to renewable energy.

The islands, which have long-standing economic and diplomatic relations with China, have a 'free association' agreement with New Zealand which provides financial backing — including [NZ\\$20mn \(\\$11.3mn\)](#) over two years to help the country's economy recover from the Covid pandemic — as well as foreign affairs and defence support.

Winston Peters, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of [New Zealand](#), has told local media that his government was "blindsided" by the move and called on the Cook Islands to share the details of the agreement with New Zealand authorities, as required by its constitution.

Brown has responded that "there is no need for New Zealand to be in the room", arguing that the pact with China is not related to security or policing so does not

require a sign-off from its near neighbour.

Australia, New Zealand and the US have been moving to counter China's growing strategic and diplomatic influence in the past three years by striking agreements with nations, including Tuvalu, Nauru and Papua New Guinea, aimed at shoring up their status as the region's primary security partners.



Mark Brown, prime minister of the Cook Islands, has said New Zealand does not need to be 'in the room' © Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP via Getty Images

However, this latest dispute has shaken confidence in that progress. New Zealand controlled the islands until the 1960s and the tiny territory – with a population of just 15,000 – is one of its closest allies in the Pacific.

“After this, people will be scratching their heads and asking what are all these other agreements worth?” said [Mihai Sora](#), director of the Lowy Institute's Pacific Islands Program.

The Trump administration's recent move to freeze US foreign aid, a key funding source for health and community projects across the region, showed that China was “pushing on an open door” in increasing its Pacific influence, said Sora.

“These type of geopolitical surprises lend credibility to the idea that China is looking to pursue any opportunity to assert itself,” he said.

The agreement follows a row in recent weeks over a since-cancelled plan to introduce

Cook Islands passports. Its citizens use New Zealand passports and Wellington said it would only support that plan if the Cook Islands voted for full independence and its citizens gave up their New Zealand passports.

The details of any agreement between the Cook Islands and China remain unclear. Brown has said the deal would foster co-operation on trade, tourism, renewable energy, agriculture, infrastructure and maritime and ocean developments, including shipping and deep-sea mining.

“I suspect Mark Brown has been pushing deep-sea mining,” said Jon Fraenkel, professor of comparative politics at the Victoria University of Wellington, who noted the potential for the extraction of key metals such as cobalt and copper.

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