For years now, the whole world has been gripped by the Sino-American confrontation. China is actively pushing the US and other Western countries from the top positions in various spheres of world economy and politics, and the US is fiercely resisting this. Important allies of the US in the West are the main states of the Anglosphere — the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As far back as World War II, the intelligence services of these countries began to cooperate, which led to the emergence of the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance, whose system of information collection and transmission envelops the entire Western world.

When the current period of aggravation in Sino-American relations began, the US began to actively involve all of its partners in the confrontation. Cooperation within the framework of the Five Eyes Alliance has also begun to steer in an anti-Chinese direction. Thus, in order to protect the strategic information of the alliance states from Chinese intelligence, at the instigation of the United States a process was launched of forcing Chinese telecommunications companies such as Huawei and ZTE out of the states of the Five Eyes.

However, unexpectedly for Washington, not all members of the alliance agreed to unconditionally follow its demands. New Zealand began to sabotage the American fight with China.

Recall that China is its largest trading partner, accounting for up to a third of all New Zealand exports, and that before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, one of the country’s main sources of foreign exchange was tourists from the PRC.
When the US demanded in 2018 that all Five Eyes members stop buying and using Chinese telecommunications equipment because of the threat of espionage, New Zealand initially obeyed and banned the use of Huawei equipment in building its 5G network in late 2018. However, in January 2019, China imposed precautionary trade sanctions against New Zealand, and the following month, the latter’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said that Huawei could participate in work on the future New Zealand 5G network after a security check of the project by the New Zealand Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB).

Shortly thereafter, in April 2019, Jacinda Ardern visited Beijing, where she met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and pledged to further cherish China-New Zealand relations.

Some time later, there was another intriguing swing in New Zealand between the old partners and China. In November 2020, members of the Five Eyes issued a joint statement calling on the PRC leadership to stop repressive measures against the democratic opposition in the Hong Kong Legislative Council. After that, the Five Eyes was regularly criticized by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Beijing claimed that members of the alliance formed a “conspiracy” against it. New Zealand soon joined in this criticism. In April 2021, New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said her country was uncomfortable with the Five Eyes’ outreach. According to her, New Zealand does not welcome the involvement of the Five Eyes in speaking out on issues outside the alliance’s purview.

After these statements by the head of the New Zealand Foreign Ministry, many media began to write that there was a split in the Five Eyes Alliance and that New Zealand was preparing to leave the Western world and yield to the authority of China. These reports may be overly exaggerated, but given the volume of Sino-New Zealand trade and the vivid displays of deference to Beijing by the New Zealand leadership, the emergence of such views does not seem surprising.

On May 3, 2021, the 7th China Business Summit was held in Auckland, where the PRC and New Zealand traditionally discuss economic cooperation. The event was attended by such dignitaries as Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand Secretary of Commerce Damien O’Connor, and PRC Ambassador to New Zealand Wu Xi. Among the issues discussed at the event were the development of bilateral trade and the economic crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a number of issues went beyond trade and economic relations.

Consequently, Jacinda Ardern said that as the PRC’s role in the world has increased, it has become increasingly difficult to resolve differences with that state, and that there are issues on which China and New Zealand disagree and will never be able to agree. In the words of the leader of New Zealand, there are several conflicts between the Chinese and New Zealand systems and interests and values that define those systems, and these conflicts are only increasing as Chinese influence grows. Ardern also said this is a challenge not only for New Zealand, but for many other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, Europe and elsewhere. However, she toned down her speech, adding that the mentioned controversies should not play a defining role in Sino-New Zealand relations.

As for Chinese Ambassador Wu Xi, she did not soften anything, firmly reminding the audience, as is the Chinese custom, that whatever happens in Hong Kong or XUAR is an internal matter of the PRC.

The day after the business summit, the New Zealand Parliament met to discuss the situation in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of the PRC. It is known that separatist sentiments are strong among the Muslim Uighurs who inhabit it, and some of them have a tendency toward radical Islamism. In this regard, the Chinese authorities are taking harsh measures, which many experts consider excessive. A small group of New Zealand parliamentarians has proposed that the actions of the Chinese authorities against the Uighurs be recognized as genocide. Incidentally, this is how the three representatives of the Five Eyes characterized the situation: US, UK, and Canada. The decision reached was that the New Zealand government was concerned about human rights violations in XUAR, but did not recognize the actions of the Chinese authorities as genocide.

The statements of the New Zealand prime minister and the actions of New Zealand show that this country has not yet decided on the choice between the PRC and the West, and for now is trying to please both sides. However, small and militarily undeveloped states (which New Zealand is compared to China and the United States) do not always have a choice, and New Zealand’s future depends on which side wins in the confrontation between China and the West in the South Pacific. In the meantime, it is worth noting that throughout its history, the state of New Zealand
has been an integral part of the Western English-speaking world. And its very geographic location between Australia and the US promotes cooperation with the West. So the very fact that New Zealand now faces a choice between the West and China speaks to the unprecedented power that Beijing has achieved and the beginnings of great change in the existing world order.

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