

New Zealand said it is “uncomfortable” with expanding the role of the Five Eyes, a post-war intelligence grouping which also includes the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada, recently criticised by China.

China is New Zealand’s largest trading partner, and Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta said in a speech that New Zealand sought a predictable diplomatic relationship.

New Zealand will find it necessary to speak out on issues where it does not agree with China, including developments in Hong Kong and the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, she said in a speech on Monday to the government-funded New Zealand China Council.

In later comments to media reported by New Zealand’s Newshub, Mahuta said New Zealand didn’t favour invoking the Five Eyes for “messaging out on a range of issues that really exist out of the remit of the Five Eyes”.

“We are uncomfortable with expanding the remit of the Five Eyes,” she said.

China’s foreign ministry has repeatedly criticised the Five Eyes, after all members issued a joint statement about the treatment of Hong Kong pro-democracy legislators in November.



Image source: The Guardian

Last month, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said “the Five Eyes have taken coordinated steps to gang up on China”, after Australia and New Zealand issued a

joint statement on Xinjiang.

Last year, the Five Eyes discussed cooperation beyond intelligence sharing, including on critical technology, Hong Kong, supply chains and the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a statement by Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne in 2020.

Mahuta's office told Reuters it couldn't provide a copy of her comments on the Five Eyes.

Payne will travel to New Zealand on Wednesday for meetings with Mahuta and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the first diplomatic visit between the neighbouring countries since borders reopened both ways.

Canberra has recently endured a rockier relationship with Beijing than Wellington, with Australia's trade minister unable to secure a call with his Chinese counterpart as exporters were hit with multiple trade sanctions from China.

A diplomatic dispute between China and Australia worsened in 2020 after Canberra lobbied for an international inquiry into the source of the coronavirus pandemic.

China and New Zealand upgraded a free trade agreement in January, when, Mahuta said, trade ministers had held a "constructive" call.

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