

1 May 2025

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for proactive release

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OIA 29946

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Thank you for your email of 10 February 2025 in which you request the following under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA):

any documents, briefings and memos to, or held by, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in relation to the Cook Islands-China agreement

On 17 February 2025, we contacted you to say that your request, as currently worded, would likely be refused as it would require substantial collation and research. We invited you to refine your request to be for:

Formal advice provided to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in relation to the Cook Islands-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the period 10 February 2024 to 10 February 2025.

On 22 February 2025, you agreed to this refinement with a change to the date range to 8 February to 11 February 2025.

On 25 February 2025, we confirmed the scope of your request to be for:

Formal advice provided to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in relation to the Cook Islands-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the period 8 February 2024 to 11 February 2025.

On 21 March 2025, the timeframes for responding to your request were extended by an additional 26 working days because responding to your request necessitated the review of a large quantity of information, and due to the consultations necessary to make a decision on your request (section 15A(1)(a) and (b) of the OIA refers).

Please see the following table for a list of documents in scope of your request:

#	Title	Date	Decision
1.	MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS RT HON. WINSTON PETERS And MINISTER OF HEALTH AND MINISTER FOR PACIFIC PEOPLES HON. SHANE RETI TONGA/COOK ISLANDS/SAMOA 6 - 10 February 2024	Feb 2024	Excerpt in Annex One
2.	Meeting Brief: Hon Tingika Elikana, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cook Islands	18 March 2024	Excerpt in Annex One
3.	MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS RT HON WINSTON PETERS New Zealand – Cook Islands Joint Ministerial Forum	24 May 2024	6(a); 7(b)(i); 7(b)(ii); 7(c)(i); out of scope
4.	Meeting Brief: Hon Mark Brown, Prime Minister, Cook Islands	15 November 2024	6(a); 7(b)(i); 7(b)(ii); 7(c)(i); 9(2)(g)(i); out of scope
5.	Cook Islands and China: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	21 January 2025	6(a); 7(b)(i); 7(b)(ii); 9(2)(a); 9(2)(f)(iv); 9(2)(g)(i)

Regarding documents 1 and 2 listed in the table above, large quantities of the information in these documents are outside the scope of your request therefore, an excerpt of the information in scope of your request is being provided in **Annex One** below (section 16(1)(e) refers).

Documents 3, 4 and 5 are attached.

Some information is withheld under the following sections of the OIA:

- 6(a): to avoid prejudicing the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the New Zealand Government;
- 7(b): to avoid prejudicing relations between any of the Governments of New Zealand and the self-governing State of the Cook Islands;
- 7(c)(i): to avoid prejudicing the international relations of the Governments of the self-governing State of the Cook Islands;
- 9(2)(a): to protect individuals' privacy;
- 9(2)(f)(iv): to protect the confidentiality of advice tendered by Ministers of the Crown and officials; and
- 9(2)(g)(i): to protect the free and frank expression of opinions by departments.

In addition, a letter dated 23 January 2025 from Bede Corry, Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, to Tepaeru Herrmann, Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Cook Islands Government has been included. Although this letter is not strictly in scope of your request, it supports and provides context for the submission titled *Cook Islands and China: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*. Some information in this letter is withheld under the following sections of the OIA:

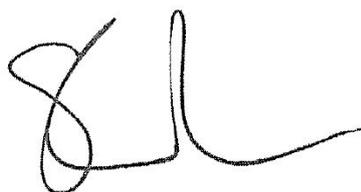
- 6(a): to avoid prejudicing the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the New Zealand Government;
- 7(b): to avoid prejudicing relations between any of the Governments of New Zealand and the self-governing State of the Cook Islands; and
- 9(2)(f)(iv): to protect the confidentiality of advice tendered by Ministers of the Crown and officials.

Where information has been withheld under section 9 of the OIA, no public interest in releasing the information has been identified that would override the reasons for withholding it.

Please note that it is our policy to proactively release our responses to official information requests where possible. Therefore, our response to your request (with your personal information removed) may be published on the Ministry website: www.mfat.govt.nz/en/about-us/contact-us/official-information-act-responses/

If you have any questions about this decision, you can contact us by email at: DM-ESD@mfat.govt.nz. You have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman of this decision by contacting www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or freephone 0800 802 602.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SC', written in a cursive style.

Sarah Corbett
for Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Annex One: Excerpts

Document 1: MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS RT HON. WINSTON PETERS and MINISTER OF HEALTH AND MINISTER FOR PACIFIC PEOPLES HON. SHANE RETI TONGA/COOK ISLANDS/SAMOA 6 - 10 February 2024 - dated February 2024

Cook Islands: China

- *[Withheld under section 7(b)(i) and (ii)].* Officials have indicated that the Cook Islands is at the final stages of negotiating a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China. *[Withheld under section 7(b)(i) and (ii)]*
- *[Withheld under section 7(b)(i) and (ii)].*

Meeting Brief: Prime Minister Hon Mark Brown – Wed 7 February CKT

- *[Withheld under section 6a, 7(b)(i) and (ii)].* Note that New Zealand is keen to share more on what we are seeing and how we are responding, and our special relationship demands a level of openness on these issues. Note that the JMF will present an opportunity to discuss this further.

Document 2: MEETING BRIEF: HON TINGIKA ELIKANA, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, COOK ISLANDS – THURSDAY 21 MARCH 2024

Cook Islands and China

- *[Withheld under section 6a, 7(b)(i) and (ii)].*
- [Minister Elikana is unlikely to raise the Cook Islands Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan (CSP) with you.] *If raised:* Refer to Prime Minister Brown's comment in February about "wanting to put more structure around the relationship with China" and note expectations about New Zealand being consulted before decisions are finalised on the CSP. We do not want *[Withheld under section 6a, 7(b)(i) and (ii)]* from the Cook Islands as one of our closest partners. [MFAT has raised these messages with counterparts].

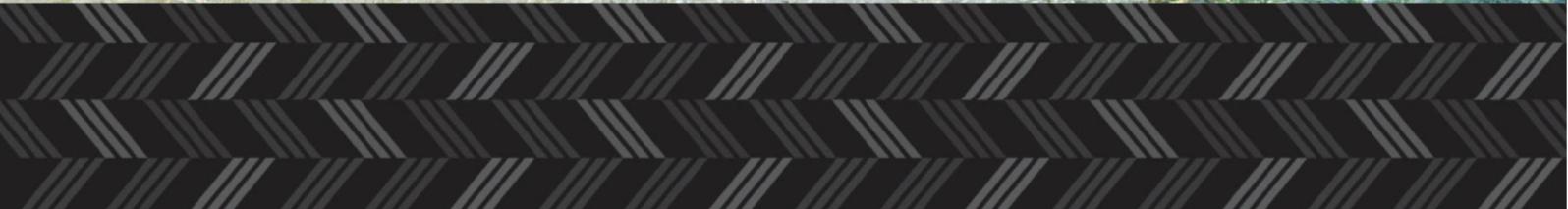


NEW ZEALAND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE
Manatū Aorere

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
RT HON WINSTON PETERS

New Zealand – Cook Islands
Joint Ministerial Forum

24 May 2024



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The following 12 pages are out of scope and have been removed.

Overview Brief

Objectives of the Forum

- Reiterate the significance of our constitutional relationship, emphasising that the Realm and associated mutual obligations continue to matter to New Zealand, as we look forward to the 60th Anniversary next year.
- Register our concern about the Cook Islands' unwillingness to discuss with New Zealand its plans to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan with China.

Out of scope

2. Out of scope

the JMF and the 60th Anniversary are important opportunities to deliver clearer messages to the Cook Islands about the nature of our constitutional relationship, our mutual responsibilities (including for defence and security) and associated expectations.

Out of scope

5. Officials have attempted several times to discuss the Cook Island's plans for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) Action Plan with China. We emphasised that we

do not want any s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) and that this is an issue of mutual concern which we have a legitimate interest in understanding better. Officials have offered to support a risk assessment of the document s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)

While assuring us that it does not include security aspects, Cook Islands officials s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

have declined to share the document and repeatedly responded that they don't see why they should consult their plans with New Zealand, noting that New Zealand did not consult our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China when it was being developed (ten years ago).

6. We understand the CSP has yet to be put to Cabinet for approval and as such there is still scope for engagement. When concluded, signing would likely take place on a State Visit to China by Prime Minister Brown, or in a China-Cook Islands Foreign Ministers meeting, but timing has not been confirmed.

7. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)

8. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

Your time with Minister Elikana at the JMF, in particular your Individual Meeting with him, is a prime opportunity to remind the Cook Islands of our special relationship and the associated expectations and reinforce that New Zealand does not want to be "surprised" by this CSP or other significant policy decisions.

The following 2 pages are out of scope and have been removed.

MEETINGS AND EVENT BRIEFS

Released under the Official Information Act

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon Tingika Elikana

Time and date: 10:45am – 11.15am, Friday 24 May



Minister Elikana [Elle-Lee-Car-Nah] was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Immigration, and Marine Resources in February 2024 (straight after your visit). He is a member of the Cook Islands Party, representing Pukapuka-Nassau, and has been in Parliament since 2018.

Prior to entering politics, Minister Elikana served as the Secretary of Justice, Solicitor-General, a crown prosecutor and police officer. Minister Elikana has a Bachelor of Laws from Victoria University (1989-1995) and a Masters in Business Administration from the University of the South Pacific (2007-2009). He is a devout member of the Cook Islands Christian Church, and is an avid golfer and tennis player.

Key objectives

- Emphasise the importance we attach to our constitutional relationship and the mutual expectations that flow from this.
- Register our concern about the Cook Islands' unwillingness to engage with New Zealand on its plans to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan with China.

Key points

- Out of scope
- Note the value we attach to our relationship with the Cook Islands, and emphasise that as close and significant partners, we expect a **"no-surprises" approach** in our relationship and appreciate **close and proactive consultation on issues of mutual interest**. We recognise we can do better in this space too.
- Given our closeness and constitutional ties, we each have a strong interest in how the other is pursuing its relationship with China, including any upgrades/expansions. Seek a frank update on the Cook Islands' plan to sign a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan** with China.
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- *If there is push back that New Zealand would not reciprocate this kind of sharing –* Emphasise you want the Ministry to share more. We want a relationship of deep trust so senior officials feel they can be candid s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- Seek Minister Elikana's views on our bilateral relationship, including possible areas to strengthen as we work to elevate the relationship ahead of the 60th Anniversary.

The following 14 pages are out of scope and have been removed.

Out of scope

3.2 Third Country Engagement in the Cook Islands

Key objective:

- Normalise a frank exchange on third countries engaged in the Cook Islands.
- Register that New Zealand understands that, due to the Cook Islands' ODA graduation, ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} partners struggle to provide support. We are committed to work creatively to ensure third countries can best support Cook Islands.
- *If not discussed during the bilateral with Elikana:* Register our concern about the Cook Islands' unwillingness to engage on its plans to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan with China.

s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

Key points:

- Our message to third countries in the Pacific is that engagement should deliver on Pacific priorities, support regional norms, and go through regional architecture where possible.
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- s6(a)
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- *If not discussed in the bilateral:* Seek a frank update on the Cook Islands' plan to sign a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan** with China. Given our closeness and constitutional ties, we each have a strong interest in how the other is pursuing its relationship with China, including any upgrades/expansions.

Out of scope

Released under the Official Information Act

The following 11 pages are out of scope and have been removed.

Regional issues

Third Country Engagement in the Cook Islands

Out of scope

4. **China** and the Cook Islands have had diplomatic relations for 26 years. s6(a), s7(b)(I), s7(b)(II)

The Cook Islands and China are also planning to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan (see bilateral brief).
Out of scope

Meeting Brief: Hon Mark Brown, Prime Minister, Cook Islands

Time and date (NZT): **Date**



Hon Mark Brown was appointed Prime Minister in 2020. He is the Leader of the Cook Islands Party, which was re-elected in 2022 for a four-year term. Prime Minister Brown holds the Ministerial responsibilities for Finance and Economic Management, Attorney General, Public Service Commission, Police, Seabed Minerals Authority, Tourism, Energy and Renewable Energy Outer Island Special Projects and Telecommunications. Prime Minister Brown is in New Zealand to undertake community consultations on deep sea mining and 60th Anniversary plans.

Population: 14,800 (June 2023)
 GDP (PPP, per capita): \$24,040
 Inflation (%): 13

NZ exports (NZ\$/yr): 152.5m (2022/23)
 NZ imports (NZ\$/yr): 1.29m (2022/23)
 Next elections: 2026

Key objectives

- Communicate clearly that New Zealand does not support the proposed Cook Islands citizenship and passport. This proposal would require a major shift in our constitutional relationship and s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- Out of scope

Talking points

- Out of scope

- Emphasise the **value New Zealand places on our special constitutional relationship**. It has brought immense shared benefits, as well as mutual responsibilities.

Cook Islands citizenship and passport proposal.

- Emphasise that Prime Minister Brown's **proposal misrepresents what is possible under the current constitutional relationship**.
- **New Zealand does not, and will not, support such a proposal.**
- The Realm of New Zealand has one sovereign and one citizenship. This is a **foundational concept** that underpins the Realm and our free association model.
- Out of scope

- s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) is to have a document that conveys Cook Islands identity, then an option is a **national identity card**. That would avoid the constitutional, practical and financial implications of a separate passport and citizenship.

Constitutional status

- Note that in 1965, the **Cook Islands chose free association** rather than full independence. While this model has allowed our partnership to evolve over the years, it has limits.
- s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) the creation of citizenship is intrinsically linked to an act of independence, and therefore **risks disrupting the existing free association relationship and the ongoing right of Cook Islanders to New Zealand citizenship by birth**. Such a move needs to be subject to a referendum.

Cook Islands and China

- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)
- s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)

- While we acknowledge China has been a long-standing development partner in the Pacific, s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)
- As a Realm Partner our security is intertwined. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)
- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)

If raised: s9(2)(g)(i)

- Acknowledge that given the closeness of our partnership and how deeply integrated our government agencies are, we are interested in any significant uplift the Cook Islands is planning with another partner. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s7(c)(i)

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

- s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

- s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

- s7(b)(i),
s7(b)(ii)

Background

New Zealand support to the Cook Islands

1 The Cook Islands receives significant benefits from our free association relationship and New Zealand citizenship. This is highly valued by Cook Islanders. Since proposing a Cook Islands' passport, the Cook Islands' public has expressed strong concern in media that it would impact access to their New Zealand citizenship and passports.

2 As New Zealand citizens, Cook Islanders enjoy freedom of movement to and from New Zealand (and Australia), and access to publicly funded education, health and disability services in New Zealand. In addition, the Cook Islands receives economic and administrative assistance both through the International Development Cooperation (IDC - 2023/24 FY \$24.2m) and many New Zealand agencies through their baseline funding.

3 Out of scope

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

4 Out of scope

5 Out of scope

6 Out of scope

Out of scope

7 Out of scope

8 Out of scope

9 Out of scope

10 Out of scope

11 Out of scope

12 Out of scope

Pacific Polynesia and French Pacific Division/ Legal Division
15 November 2024



21 January 2025

Minister of Foreign Affairs

For approval by

23 January 2025

Cook Islands and China: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

BRIEFING Decision Submission

PURPOSE s6(a)

Recommended referrals

Prime Minister	For information by	24 January 2025
Minister of Defence	For information by	24 January 2025

Contact details

NAME	ROLE	DIVISION	WORK PHONE
Jane Coombs	Divisional Manager	Polynesia and French Pacific Division	s9(2)(a)

Minister's Office to complete

- | | | |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Noted | <input type="checkbox"/> Referred |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needs amendment | <input type="checkbox"/> Declined | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by events | <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's notes | |

Comments

Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Key points

- We became aware ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} that Prime Minister Brown's proposed trip to China - during which he intends to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) - is now likely scheduled for early February.
- New Zealand has consistently conveyed, at all levels, ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} Despite these concerted efforts, our concerns have been ignored ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
- Actions currently underway:
 - ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
- We **seek your agreement** to the following actions:
 - Request formal consultations with the Cook Islands Government under the Joint Centenary Declaration.
^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
 -
 - Call in the Cook Islands High Commissioner, with senior Ministry officials continuing to engage with Cook Islands counterparts in Rarotonga.
 - Despatch a senior official to brief Prime Minister Brown ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
 - ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
- ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}

Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

- s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
-
- In anticipation of the Cook Islands proceeding to sign a CSP, s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) further advice is being developed, s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

Bede Corry

Bede Corry
Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

- 1 **Note** the Cook Islands is intending to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with China during a State Visit by Prime Minister Brown likely in early February. **Yes / No**
- 2 **Note** that a range of efforts, at all levels, have been made over many months ^{s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} and that in recent days we have been active again in conveying our concerns in Rarotonga. **Yes / No**
- 3 **Agree** to the following immediate actions to escalate our engagement: **Yes / No**
- request formal consultations under the Joint Centenary Declaration;
 - call in the Cook Islands High Commissioner in Wellington, and continue senior Ministry engagement with counterparts in Rarotonga;
 - ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
 -
 - dispatch a senior official to brief Prime Minister Brown ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)}
^{s9(2)(f)(iv)}
 -
- 4 ^{s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)} **Yes / No**
- 5 **Refer** a copy of this submission to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence. **Yes / No**

Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Date: / /

Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Report

1. The Cook Islands is one of New Zealand's closest partnerships founded on our unique constitutional relationship, shared citizenship, people-to-people links and closely integrated societies. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) We understand that Prime Minister Brown is planning to undertake a State Visit to China in early February where he intends to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with China.
2. Given the imminence of the State Visit, s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
This submission sets out the steps we have already taken and recommends actions to be taken over the next two weeks.

Context

Bilateral Relationship under strain

3. The proposed signing of a CSP comes at a time where the bilateral relationship is strained. There is a lack of openness in the relationship from the Cook Islands' side, and they are not consulting on matters of mutual interest and importance as required in a free association relationship. There has been a noticeable downturn in engagement with New Zealand on issues of significant strategic concern, s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
4. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

As a 'high-income' country, the Cook Islands is not eligible for development assistance from traditional partners such as Australia or the US.

5. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

This has been compounded by the unwillingness of the Cook Islands to share the text with us, despite numerous requests including by you to Foreign Minister Elikana at the Joint Ministerial Forum (JMF) in May last year.

6. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s9(2)(g)(i)

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s9(2)(g)(i)

Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

7. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) appear increasingly willing to dismiss strategic and reputational risks and ignore New Zealand's concerns in favour of opportunities, particularly financial opportunities. In addition to the CSP, this posture is shown in s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
- s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) the leeway given to its shipping register which is now significantly implicated in the Russian "shadow fleet", and its pursuit of a passport proposal despite strenuous New Zealand opposition.

New Zealand's interests

8. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

9.

10.

11.

The Action Plan

Heightened diplomatic efforts underway

12. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

13. This follows concerted efforts over more than a year at all levels of the Cook Islands' system, including numerous representations at officials' level in Rarotonga and Wellington. Direct messages were also conveyed to Minister Elikana at the JMF in May, in your letter to

Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Prime Minister Brown in October, and by the Prime Minister and yourself during meetings with Prime Minister Brown on 19 November 2024 at the Beehive.

14. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

Proposed actions in the next two weeks

Call for formal consultations

15. Given the gravity of this situation we recommend officially **requesting formal consultations** on the proposed CSP (and the risks it could pose to our shared interests as Realm partners) under the Joint Centenary Declaration. The Declaration requires New Zealand and the Cook Islands to consult on foreign policy matters with a view to formulating common policies on important foreign affairs issues. It also recalls that sharing a citizenship requires New Zealand and the Cook Islands to uphold shared fundamental values
s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

16. Such consultations could be broadened to include the range of concerning actions by the Cook Islands in recent months, including the involvement of its shipping registry in the Russian 'shadow fleet' and its continued push for a Cook Islands passport. It seems unlikely that such consultations could be held prior to Prime Minister Brown's visit to Beijing, s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) The triggering of this request would however signal, s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) the seriousness with which we regard the issue. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

Stepped up engagement at the officials level

17. To reinforce efforts already under way by our High Commission in Rarotonga, we propose to **call in the Cook Islands High Commissioner** in Wellington to formally convey the seriousness of this issue. The Ministry will also focus on ongoing senior official engagement with Cook Islands' counterparts.

18. We also recommend promptly **deploying a senior official** to Rarotonga to brief Prime Minister Brown s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) While it has been challenging to s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) to take these seriously, we think that the signal it sends of the seriousness with which New Zealand takes s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) could have an impact on Prime Minister Brown. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii) s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

20.

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s9(2)(f)(iv)

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

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Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

25.

26.

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

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Cook Islands and China - a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

29. s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

30.

Resourcing

31. Financial – these efforts can be pursued with baseline resourcing. s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)
s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii)

32. People – there are no people resourcing implications.

33. Prioritisation – these efforts are a continuation and escalation of existing priority workstreams.

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23 January 2025

Tepaeru Herrmann
Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Immigration
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration
Cook Islands Government
PO Box 105, Avarua
Rarotonga, Cook Islands

Dear Secretary Herrmann,

Please accept my warm New Year greetings, for what will be a particularly special year for New Zealand and the Cook Islands, as we celebrate 60 years of our free association relationship.

I am however concerned that as we start this special year, there are a number of significant issues that are giving rise to tensions in the relationship, and indeed risk disrupting the fabric of the special relationship itself.

I am therefore proposing that I travel to Rarotonga early next week for formal consultations with the Cook Islands Government. I request these consultations with a sense of urgency, given what we understand to be Prime Minister Brown's intentions to travel to Beijing in early February to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), and possibly other agreements.

As we have sought to make clear to the Cook Islands Government on numerous occasions, including by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, New Zealand has fundamental concerns about the Cook Islands concluding a CSP and any other agreements that pose risks to the security of the Realm. These concerns have been compounded by a persistent lack of transparency from the Cook Islands Government as to the rationale for and the precise content of the agreement/s.

This lack of transparency is inconsistent with the letter and the spirit of the 2001 Joint Centenary Declaration in which both our governments also agreed *inter alia* to consult regularly on foreign affairs matters and to advise each other when a proposed foreign policy initiative may affect the interests of the other partner. Moreover, the Declaration commits us

both to consult regularly on defence and security matters to advise each other of any risks that may affect either or both signatories as they become known.

It is the considered view of the New Zealand Government that agreements such as the proposed CSP fall into this category. While your Government may consider that the agreement poses no implications for your defence and security interests, and while we profoundly disagree with that, these matters must also be considered in light of their impact on the Realm as a whole. In other words, New Zealand has direct interests at stake and a right to expect consultation on them.

Given this, and given the tight timelines, I will make myself available for urgent consultations early next week. Our understanding from your High Commissioner is that you would welcome such a visit, and I am grateful for that.

s6(a), s7(b)(i), s7(b)(ii), s9(2)(f)(iv)

I would also look to use the opportunity of my visit to discuss a number of other issues that we consider pose risk to the Realm and to the special character of the relationship, such as the Cook Islands passport proposal, and the deep reputational risks to the Realm posed by your shipping registry.

This will be my first visit to the Cook Islands, and I look forward to meeting you and other colleagues in person. I would expect these consultations could be supplemented by a later and more detailed subsequent survey of current issues in the relationship in this, our 60th anniversary year. Dialogue is essential if we are to preserve the character of what is, to us, a unique and special relationship.

Yours sincerely,



Bede Corry
Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Copy to: Karopaerangi Ngatoko, Chief of Staff, Office of the Prime Minister
Garth Henderson, Secretary of Finance and Economic Management