

# Confronting Great Powers: New Zealand's Nuclear Stance During the Cold War

Written by Antonios Vitalis

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New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, recently asserted that New Zealand has "an independent foreign policy and always will" (Small, 2018). The roots of this independent foreign policy are historical but firmly established after the election of the Fourth Labour Government in 1984. From 1984, New Zealand's approach on foreign policy issues changed, specifically concerning its position on nuclear weapons, to the displeasure of its closest partners. Underpinning this independent foreign policy has been the longstanding debate in international relations theory (IR) accounting for a small country's foreign policy. This essay contributes to this debate by considering whether neorealism or constructivism better explains New Zealand's independent foreign policy between 1984-1987 regarding a specific case study — the French Government's bombing of the Rainbow Warrior in 1985.

This essay begins with an overview of the relevant literature on small states' foreign policy, particularly New Zealand. It then considers neorealism and constructivism, noting their relevance for assessing New Zealand's independent foreign policy. In this context, a case study of a significant moment in New Zealand's foreign policy is analysed regarding both theories. It is concluded that neorealism offers some insights, but on balance, it is less able to persuasively explain New Zealand's independent foreign policy because of its materialistic and structuralist perspective. Conversely, a constructivist analysis, which incorporates ideational, historical and domestic political factors, provides more significant insights into New Zealand's actions and, in this way, has greater explanatory power than the neorealists.

### Literature Overview and Case Study Selection

IR theory historically focuses on the interplay between major powers, with less attention paid to the role and function of small states. Small state analysis is argued to have no "practical" or "theoretical utility". After all, small states are viewed as limited in influencing international politics, often submitting "to the dictates of larger" (Buchanan, 2010, p. 256; Baehr, 1975, pp. 456-457; Patman, 2006, pp 86-87; Thorhallsson, 2019, pp.379-380). Indeed, the perception of small states as minor players "who suffer what they must" has a long history (Thucydides, 1972, p. 402).

The Melian Dialogue in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* underlines this point, reflecting "the powerlessness of small states when confronting larger states" (Thucydides, 1972, pp. 401-402; Buchanan, 2010, p. 256). In addition, the perception that small states have a limited and constrained capacity to operate because of large state influence and power further explains the limited academic literature focused on small states, let alone small, developed economies like New Zealand (Buchanan, 2010, pp. 255-257; Brady, 2019 p. 8). While the Melian Dialogue can represent the peak 'realist' perspective on small states in IR, small states have found ways to survive and even thrive.

New Zealand's foreign policy reveals the capacity of small states to operate relatively independently and with some room for manoeuvre (Buchanan, 2010, pp. 255, 278; Patman, 2006, pp 87, 91; Brady, 2019, p. 3-6). Furthermore, Buchanan suggests the period 1984-1987 as pivotal in establishing New Zealand's independent foreign policy in diplomatically balancing "international institutional support" and "punch[ed] above its weight" (Ibid., pp. 262, 277-279). Similarly, McKinnon also emphasises this period within New Zealand history as transformative for its

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independent foreign policy.

Independence is defined in McKinnon's analysis in two parts: as dissent or as defence of interest (McKinnon, 1992, pp. 3-4). Dissent refers to the "progressive critique of an existing pattern" not as a challenge to an "underlying structure" (Ibid., p. 3). 'Defence of interest,' however, refers to the maintenance of imperial ties with the British Empire. It did not "necessarily entail 'independence'" instead of as a new form "of 'dependence'" (Ibid., pp. 4-5). McKinnon traces the complex journey New Zealand travelled in securing sovereignty, the legal right of "exclusive authority [in a state's] borders ... and ... the rights of membership within the international community" (Haynes et al., 2013, p. 714). In this way, New Zealand independence, particularly in foreign policy, was an evolving process rather than a singular historic 'tipping point'. It was, however, galvanised periodically by specific events, like the bombing of the Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior vessel in 1985. (Brady, 2019 pp. 3-8; McKinnon 1993, p. 281).

Like Buchanan, McKinnon describes 1984-1987 as significant for New Zealand in achieving its current independent foreign policy but warns against overstating its significance (McKinnon, 1993, p. 278). This period should be analysed not as a "sharp transition" from a subjugated nation to an independent one. Instead, it should be seen as a progressive evolution (Ibid., p. 12). The consideration of case studies, like the Rainbow Warrior Incident, is essential in "testing theoretical propositions in the social sciences", particularly concerning which theory best accounts for New Zealand's independent foreign policy (Buchanan, 2010, p. 256; Eckstein, 1975, pp. 75-77).

What McKinnon and Buchanan share with their work on New Zealand is an emphasis on realism, not constructivism (McKinnon, 1993, pp. 295-298; Buchanan, 2010, pp. 258-259). This is striking since realism as a theory would presume a limited ability for small states to indulge in an 'independent foreign policy'. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between neorealism and classical realism theory, the latter of which claims state behaviour results from human emotions/desires. Neorealism extends this scope to inter-state relations and conflict, suggesting these are accounted by and result from structural factors (Morgenthau, 1978, pp. 4-15; Haynes, et al., 2013, pp. 125-126). These structural factors include the absence of a supranational authority regulating international politics. Thus, reflecting an anarchic IR world. In these circumstances states are actors operating according to self-interest seeking security by pursuing and attaining relative gains/power at the expense of neighbours (Goodin, 2010, p. 133; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3; Waltz 1979 p. 119).

Two subsets of neorealism – defensive and offensive realism – are valuable reference points. Defensive realism argues that states inherently do not seek conflict or power; instead, their concern is maintaining "their position in the system" (Waltz, 1979, p. 94). Conversely, offensive realists argue that states ensure security by being "more powerful ... relative to their rivals" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3; Mearsheimer, 1994-1995, pp. 11-12). However, both strands agree that a bipolar system guarantees the international system's stability. This is because it relies on internal balancing, which improves the capacity to avoid errors that exist in a multipolar system (Waltz, 1979, pp. 132-134). Given the Rainbow Warrior Incident case study during the bipolar Cold War, a neorealist analysis can be justified.

Where neorealists emphasise the significance of systemic analysis in IR, constructivism emphasises the interactions between structure and agency (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, pp. 268; Flockhart, 2010, pp. 79-82). In essence, constructivism views states as "individual human beings" where ideational factors, rather than materialistic explanations proposed by neorealism in acquiring territory, resources and military strength, explain state behaviour (Haynes et al., 2013, p. 230; Wendt, 1999, p. 1). The relationship between "interests, norms and institutions" is a crucial focus for constructivist analysis, particularly in formulating a foreign policy of a given state (Haynes et al., 2013, pp. 229-230). The nature of power, particularly the balance of power that produces a bipolar or multipolar world accounted for by neorealism empirically, is not persuasive to constructivists. Instead, the definition of and responses to power are debated between states producing inter-state relations (Flockhart, 2010, pp. 81-82).

Furthermore, constructivism rejects the argument that the anarchic and structural nature of the international system causes inter-state conflict. Such an analysis, in their view, is limited in understanding world politics beyond the unit or state level because it assumes conflict is inevitable (Wendt, 1992, p. 265). Systemic constructivists like Wendt acknowledge the existence of a structure in international relations as significantly informing and shaping foreign

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policy but incorporate factors such as history, identity, ideas and culture (Wendt, 1992, p. 392; Wendt, 1999). Hence, constructivist methodology “stresses” historical events and analysis of a given area or case study to “demonstrate” the interchange between structure and agency with high proficiency (Haynes et al., 2013, p. 230). Regarding New Zealand's independent foreign policy, constructivism would focus on specific incidents in New Zealand's history to better account for its independent foreign policy (Wendt, 1992; McKinnon, 1993, pp. 11-13).

While constructivism does extend beyond the rationalist foundations of neorealism, it has been “criticised by both rationalist and reflections” theories as lacking consistency or not being “radical” enough to challenge the nature of inter-state conflict espoused by neorealism in IR (Haynes et al., 2013, p. 230). Nevertheless, despite having ontologically contrasted positions, both neorealism and constructivism as mechanisms of analysis “to theorise” IR can simultaneously be applied to account for areas of analyses where one may fall short (Fearon & Wendt, 2002, p. 57). Therefore, constructivism and neorealism can shed additional light on a historical event in New Zealand history and offer insights into New Zealand's independent foreign policy between 1984-1987.

In considering which IR approach best explains New Zealand's independent foreign policy, this essay considers France's 1985 state-sponsored bombing of the Greenpeace vessel, the Rainbow Warrior, in Auckland harbour. Given that an independent New Zealand foreign policy is often symbolised by its anti-nuclear stance – embodied by the passing of the Nuclear Free New Zealand Act (NFNZA) in 1987 – this case study represents an accelerated progress towards a NFNZA as a significant turning point in New Zealand's foreign policy (McKinnon, 1993, pp. 279-281; Brady, 2019, pp.1-2; Patman, 2006, pp. 85). By assessing both theories outlined earlier, we can assess which of these better accounts for Zealand's independent foreign policy

## Discussion and Analysis

New Zealand opposition to nuclear weapons had existed before the 1984-1987 period. Opposition to nuclear weapons, both in use and transport, dates back to the 1966 commencement of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific at Mururoa Atoll (Lange, 1985, p. 28). The Third Labour Government, for instance, sent a naval frigate to “observe” the testing in the early 1970s, alongside a civilian flotilla protesting France's actions (Patman, 2006, pp. 85-87). The election of the Fourth Labour Government in 1984 saw opposition to nuclear testing and the use of nuclear weapons as a salient mainstream political issue (Clements, 1988, pp. 397-398; Gustafson, 2000, p. 375). Risks to health, environmental safety, and general scepticism about the reliability and functionality, let alone stability, of the bipolar Cold War era, mobilised a collective New Zealand response against nuclear weapons (McKinnon, 1993, p. 279).

This took protest action at Mururoa Atoll to build a coalition against nuclear testing throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The Rainbow Warrior – considered at the time as a flagship of the environmental group Greenpeace – was highly successful in organising and leading these protests, though the testing did not stop (Ibid., p. 281). On the 10th of July 1985, the Rainbow Warrior's activities in opposition to French nuclear testing were ended when, while moored in the harbour of New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, it was blown up by an explosive device attached to its hull by two French intelligence agents, killing one Dutch national on the ship (Ibid.).

The New Zealand Government, to this day, considers this act as an act of state-sponsored terrorism (McKinnon, 1993, p. 286). To France's consternation, New Zealand police swiftly identified and then arrested and put on trial the French secret service agents responsible for the attack. Both were sentenced to ten years in prison for terrorism, despite the protests of France and more muted opposition to the arrests from several other countries (including the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada; all close partners of New Zealand) (McKinnon, 1993, pp. 281-282; Clements, 1988, pp. 395). During this time, the New Zealand Government made extensive representations at the United Nations arguing the attack breached New Zealand sovereignty and violated international law. Thus, France should be held accountable (Shabecoff, 1987).

France flatly rejected these representations, which proceeded to punish New Zealand by stalling the bi-annual negotiations for sheep meat and dairy quotas worth more than \$600 million to New Zealand – crucial to the domestic sheep meat sector of which 92% of annual production went to the European Union. France also threatened to extend

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its stalling tactic to the range of dairy (butter and cheese) quotas New Zealand had, providing it with preferential access to the Common Market (McKinnon, 1993, p.283; Patman, 2006, p. 88). At the same time, and in a sense compounding the New Zealand Government's challenge, its response to the attack in Auckland harbour was widely seen domestically as a practical manifestation of the country's independent foreign policy (McKinnon, 1993, p. 282).

Ultimately, due to its economic dependence on the EU, New Zealand was forced to compromise. Negotiations between Paris and Wellington resulted in the transfer of the two French agents to serve the remainder of their prison terms outside of New Zealand (McKinnon, 1993, p. 285). In return, the negotiations for quota rights in commodity products were resumed (Ibid.). It is also worth noting that shortly after arriving in French Polynesia, both agents developed mysterious illnesses and were evacuated for "medical reasons" to France, where they were decorated for their service (Ibid.). New Zealand protests against the transfer to France were made at the UN and in Paris but were ignored (Patman, 2006). The decision by France to transfer and decorate the agents - in violation of the understandings reached with New Zealand did have a critical domestic corollary. These actions served to solidify domestic political opinion firmly in favour of a more comprehensive anti-nuclear policy and accelerated progress on the eventual legislative changes that led to the passing of the NFNZA.

Neorealists would depict the Rainbow Warrior Incident as an illustrative example of a small state being forced to succumb to the greater power of a larger state. France was indeed able to exert its power and influence in economic and commercial areas (e.g., stall EU negotiations on quota allocation for New Zealand sheep meat). Neorealists would also highlight the limited scope New Zealand had to change its operational settings to counter French power - a situation reinforced by France's ability to secure its objectives, the release of its agents, and the continuation of its nuclear testing. For France, these objectives were justified in the name of state security - a classical neorealist perspective - because nuclear testing reflects both a state's capacity for war and preparation for it (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 63 Huth, 1999, p. 25). This further confirms with neorealist theory as the bi-polar nature of world politics during the Cold War saw both hegemony, the US and USSR, with immense nuclear power and thus an 'effective' deterrent against each other, thereby providing order from the potential chaos the international system (Waltz, 1979, pp. 132-134). France's ability to sustain its nuclear testing programme in the face of small state protests can be viewed as Paris securing its national security imperatives; the need to increase, and improve its nuclear deterrence against the USSR, hence its determination to reject the anti-nuclear protests led by the Rainbow Warrior (Patman, 2006, p. 94). Additionally, Mearsheimer would argue that France was pursuing maximisation of relative gains in the South Pacific at the expense of the smaller state, which is essentially helpless to counter the larger power (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3). Bombing the Rainbow Warrior in 1985 while in the harbour of New Zealand is undoubtedly reflective of offensive realism.

Offensive realism further suggests that security for states is only ensured by reflecting one's military power "relative to their rivals". One may see France's act of bombing the Rainbow Warrior in New Zealand as demonstrating its authority in the South Pacific as a regional hegemon and a means to silence criticism of its nuclear testing programme. Through this prism, the anti-nuclear protests could have been perceived by France as threatening an upending of the international political structure, posing a risk to France in maintaining its military force, status and ability to protect its interests (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, the bombing may be seen as a warning designed to deter others with the trade and economic sanctions applied as further illustrations of Great Power will (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 3, 29).

Neorealism also helps us understand the position of New Zealand during this bipolar period of world politics. New Zealand had to accept that France could secure its objectives because of New Zealand's economic dependency on the European market. In line with neorealist perspectives, the small state, in this case, was unable to deploy its limited military or diplomatic assets in the face of France's superiority in this area and was eventually forced to succumb to France's preferred outcome. What the neorealists fail to account for, however, is that while in the short term, France may have 'won' the initial phase of the Rainbow Warrior Incident, its position was severely affected by the passing of the NFNZA. The latter legislatively ensured that future New Zealand Governments would be legally obliged to take all measures necessary, short of force, to prevent nuclear weapons and nuclear testing from occurring in the region. The NFNZA made France's long-term position in the region much more vulnerable over time, including its testing programme.

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It is interesting to consider whether the Rainbow Warrior would have been safer had it been harboured in New Zealand's nearby neighbour Australia. The latter is much larger economically, geographically and militarily. Though Australia had made clear, it was not supportive of Greenpeace's protest actions and would not have deployed its navy as New Zealand had done in the Mururoa Atoll (Brady, 2019, p. 3). Again, this reinforces neorealist perspectives since it showed how even a medium-sized state like Australia recognises its limits within international relations when set against a significant power like France (Mearsheimer, 1994-1995, pp. 10-12).

At the same time, neorealism has certain limitations in helping us understand the role and nature of small states within the international system. While it may shed light on structuralist perspectives, neorealism provides little insight into the importance of domestic factors – and these are particularly significant in this case study (Elman, 1995, p. 173). Since neorealism does not take account of the nature of New Zealand domestic politics at the time of the bombing, focusing instead on external structural factors such as French military force and its determination to continue nuclear testing, neorealism fails to explain how the Rainbow Warrior incident accelerated the introduction of NFNZA in the New Zealand Parliament.

Conversely, constructivism offers us richer insights and can explain how the Rainbow Warrior Incident symbolised an independent New Zealand foreign policy. The analysis above of this case study demonstrated the structural inevitability of a power conflict imbalance between France and New Zealand, but it failed in two overlapping areas. First, it fails to account for New Zealand's independent foreign policy persuasively because it cannot tell us how domestic politics intersected with the international challenges New Zealand faced. Second, it cannot explain how the Rainbow Warrior incident facilitates and accelerates the eventual passing of the Nuclear Free New Zealand Act of 1987 (McKinnon, 1993, p. 278).

Before the French attack on the Rainbow Warrior, there was a general sense in New Zealand that passing the anti-nuclear legislation would be close to impossible. Parliamentary support was lacking (Ibid.). That all changed – not necessarily because of the attack itself – because of French behaviour, widely seen as arrogant and contemptuous revelling in its middle-to-large power status over a smaller state. Constructivism accounts for the acceleration of the anti-nuclear legislation because it considers the historical evolution of domestic factors in influencing the legislation's support after the French attack in Auckland (Ibid., p. 285).

Within constructivism, the 'Wendtian' perspective reflects how historical processes shifted the social norms, producing a new form of social identity. In New Zealand, this was the establishment and facilitation of a stronger and emboldened anti-nuclear movement following the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior (Wendt, 1992, p. 402). As Price and Reus-Smit highlight, this does not solely "explain fundamental changes in state identity" (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, p. 268), but it is built on the existing foundations of perception of New Zealand independence and the value that New Zealanders placed on this. While Wendt does contest the inevitable nature of the structure that neorealism holds to explain the conflict between France and New Zealand in 1985, neorealism can only go so far in accounting for the domestic processes occurring in New Zealand. Non-systemic constructivists Kratochwil and Ruggie can fill this analytical gap.

The growing dissent, one component of McKinnon's definition of independence, against nuclear weapons in New Zealand falls under the scope of non-systemic constructivism. Both Ruggie and Kratochwil highlight the importance of recognising how relevant domestic processes intersect with international structures in revealing information on a "global social order" and that this can drive the evolution of foreign and domestic policies (Kratochwil, 1993; p. 67; Ruggie, 1986 p. 141-146; Price & Reus-Smit, 1998 p. 269). This is undoubtedly the case for New Zealand as it underwent several attitudinal changes in culture and identity against the incumbent conservative National Government before the election of the Labour Government in 1984 (McKinnon, 1992, pp. 7-9).

The more "liberalised" youth counterculture symbolised by the nuclear protests that had emerged in the 1970s combined with the Rainbow Warrior incident and French behaviour shook the foundation of New Zealand society. Before this, the anti-nuclear movement had been primarily the preserve of the Labour Party. The National Party avoided the issue (Gustafson, 2000, p. 137). Following the Rainbow Warrior attack, however, domestic politics in New Zealand became more bipartisan, including when National Party constituents (e.g. sheep farmers) were

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affected by French reprisals (McKinnon, 1992, pp. 286, 289-293). Ruggie and Kratochwil would argue this shifted ideational priorities in New Zealand from what McKinnon describes as a loyalty to the Empire and traditional allies such as the UK and the US – which themselves supported France, to one of national interest – completing McKinnon's definition of independence in foreign policy (McKinnon, 1992, pp. 10; Ruggie, 1986 p. 148; Kratochwil, 1993; p. 69).

Unlike neorealism, constructivism rejects the inevitability of the French-New Zealand incident following the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior. It demonstrates how this conflict resulted from historical processes, including ideational shifts within New Zealand culture leading to anti-nuclear legislation in 1987. While it does not necessarily disagree with the power imbalance between France and New Zealand, it would assert power for constructivists: here was French economic influence exerted through the existence of the EU Common Market rather than overt military pressure.

Where constructivism outperforms neorealist analysis is its ability to better account for how in 1987, two years after the Rainbow Warrior bombing, New Zealand passed NFNZA. This legislation reflected and characterised New Zealand foreign policy (Buchanan, 2010, pp. 264-268). The contents of the legislation established a Nuclear Free Zone in New Zealand and “promote[d] ... the ... process of disarmament” (Legislation, 1987). Neorealism cannot account for this sharp transition and passing of landmark legislation that would challenge the nuclear-armed international system. The neorealists would have posited that New Zealand as a small state would not pass such legislation in the face of the larger state objections, including France and the US, the UK and Australia, among others. Large states like the US sanctioned New Zealand diplomatically and militarily (refusing to share intelligence) and downgraded New Zealand's trading relationship with the US (McKinnon, 1992, p. 289). Despite this pressure, or because of it, the legislation held firm (Buchanan, 2010, pp. 275-279).

Constructivism reveals how the gradual historical evolution of ideas, culture and identity delivered the New Zealand response to the Rainbow Warrior bombing. It can also explain how, after the bombing, a now galvanised domestic minority movement was able to secure majority support in the New Zealand legislature in favour of passing the legislation that symbolises an independent New Zealand foreign policy. In this way, constructivism explains this foreign policy as independent in that it opposed and rejected great power politics (*dissent*) in favour of national *interest*, once more reasserting McKinnon's definition of independence.

The neorealist perspective illuminated New Zealand's challenges in seeking an independent foreign policy through a sole emphasis on the events in the case study. The absence of support from New Zealand's traditional foreign policy partners like Australia, the UK and the US and the impending French economic sanctions made it clear New Zealand could not reject French influence/power. These events confirm the neorealist view of international relations. However, neorealism cannot adequately explain how the impact of French behaviour emboldened and solidified New Zealand's determination to pass the NFNZA. Conversely, constructivism accounts for the events that transpired on the 10th of July 1985 and offer a way to understand the role of historical processes in driving identity changes. This ultimately better accounts for why New Zealand passed NFNZA two years later, establishing its independent foreign policy platform.

## Conclusion

This essay has considered whether neorealism or constructivism better accounts for New Zealand's independent foreign policy regarding the Rainbow War incident. Both theories offer essential insights into the foreign policy of small state New Zealand and the influence and power of France. The asymmetry between the two countries and the consequential impact on the foreign policy of New Zealand is engaged by neorealism, but the deeper analysis is provided by constructivism. The claim “realism and constructivism need one another to correct” each other appears to be thereby reinforced, as the analysis both theories provide on the Rainbow Warrior incident, to explain New Zealand's independent foreign policy ensures a complete picture and insight can be established (Sterling-Folker, 2002, p. 73).

Neorealism can certainly detail the structural inevitability, and behavioural nature of the ‘conflict’ between France and

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New Zealand that occurred during the Rainbow Warrior bombing as New Zealand could not successfully resist the influence and power of France, specifically regarding French threats of economic sanctions, reinforcing the neorealist perspective. However, neorealism does not adequately account for how such actions by France reinforced New Zealand's determined application of its independent foreign policy, culminating in the NFNZA. Constructivism may not elaborate or explain the causality of the rainbow warrior incident in producing conflict between France and New Zealand. However, by considering domestic political and historical factors that transformed the country's social identity in establishing its independent foreign policy via the Rainbow Warrior Incident to the eventual passing of NFNZA in 1987 by the New Zealand Parliament, constructivism provides more significant insights into the evolution and application of an independent New Zealand foreign policy.

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