

Opportunities for Strengthened Trade Relations Through Narrative Diplomacy:

New Zealand & the US

Abstract:

With the dramatic backdrop of increasing international tensions and unstable prices for commonly traded goods, countries around the globe are considering the best paths forward for their nations' economic wellbeing and security. Import-dependent nations are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of trade tensions. Political and economic leaders in New Zealand are beginning to sound alarms over the harmful effects of conflict in the Indo-Pacific trade system on the island nation's majority import-based market. One tactic for protecting the country's economy is to forge strong trade partnerships with economic superpowers. This paper offers an introduction to the current trade environment and the opportunities for New Zealand to engage the US public through strategic narratives and frames, and provides three recommendations for how Prime Minister Ardern should approach the US public ahead of her projected May talks with President Biden.

Introduction:

In a globalized society, tensions between countries can directly impact the trade ecosystems of nations worldwide, even those not directly involved in a conflict. While the concern is nearly universal, import-dependent nations feel a firm pressure to nurture strong ties

with economic stronghold countries to ensure that their citizens will not suffer the consequences of disrupted trade patterns.

With gas prices surging and an unreliable supply of fossil fuel bringing some of the world's biggest economies to their knees, society is currently witnessing an amplification of trade challenges during times of conflict. The direct economic strain resulting from the situation in Ukraine is casting a spotlight on the potential gaps in a globalized economy in which countries heavily depend on their allies for essential resources.

While not a regular participant in clashes between the world's dominant forces, New Zealand faces increasing concerns about the impacts of transnational conflicts on its market. New Zealand is highly import-dependent, with international trade making up over 60% of the country's economic activities.¹ Kiwi officials are beginning to raise alarms about potential financial and supply implications with the rise in global tensions threatening to impact trade routes, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.²

While significantly less volatile than the Russia-Ukraine conflict, rising hostility in the Indo-Pacific trade ecosystem could be dangerous to New Zealand's trade market. China is making increasingly assertive moves in the region to pursue its interests, ruffling the feathers of other economic powerhouses like the United States. Aside from the economic uncertainty New Zealand would as an effect of a conflict, there are also security concerns.³

There is an opportunity for New Zealand leadership to seize this moment of international economic fragility and relational volatility to ensure that it has a diverse and robust portfolio of

¹ "NZ Trade Policy | New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade," accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/nz-trade-policy/>.

² "New Zealand Defense Forces Warn of Rising Threat From China in Indo-Pacific | World News | US News," accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-12-08/new-zealand-defence-forces-warn-of-rising-threat-from-china-in-indo-pacific>.

³ "New Zealand Defense Forces Warn of Rising Threat From China in Indo-Pacific | World News | US News."

financial partnerships, safeguarding itself from impending downturns. Political leaders and economists are urging New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to be proactive in strengthening ties with strong economic partners, especially those in the West. New Zealand secured a free trade deal with the UK this past February, boosting bilateral trade by 60%.⁴ This deal allowed for some reassurance of trade availability, especially considering increased tensions in Europe. This deal looked to be a first step in connecting with economic powers for personal protection – the heart of New Zealand’s strategy.

The US is regarded widely as the foremost economic superpower, making it an appealing target for New Zealand’s next trade deal. Trade relations between the two nations are traditionally positive and stable, with the US maintaining its place as New Zealand’s third-biggest trading partner.⁵ Reports note that Ardern plans to visit the US for “trade-focused” conversations with top officials, including President Biden.⁶ This opportunity comes at an ideal moment to demonstrate goodwill and collaborative spirit between nations, a feel-good story everyone wants to hear.

While Ardern must prepare heavily for her meetings with policymakers and diplomats, she must not disregard the significance of US public opinion. Ardern could garner public support for a bilateral trade agreement by appealing to the masses, ultimately applying pressure to the Biden Administration to engage seriously in deal discussions. With upcoming elections in the US

⁴ Phillip Inman, “UK and New Zealand Sign Free Trade Deal,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/feb/28/uk-and-new-zealand-sign-free-trade-deal>.

⁵ New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “United States of America,” New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/countries-and-regions/americas/united-states-of-america/>.

⁶ “New Zealand, China to Upgrade Free Trade Deal in April,” accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/new-zealand-china-to-upgrade-free-trade-deal-in-april/2503428>.

and heavy divides even within parties, the Beehive team must consider how to best gain and leverage public interest in favor of US trade support to New Zealand.

To successfully reach a broad US audience and compel them to demonstrate support for the deal, Ardern and her team should strategize on how to utilize effective narratives and frames in external communication materials. This paper will define the types of narrative useful in public diplomacy efforts such as this, discuss the significance of effective narrative-frame pairings, and provide potential strategic options for Ardern to consider when persuading the US public to support this good-willed trade deal.

Strategic Narratives and Frames:

Narratives are at the core of human relations, shaping our perceptions of the world and allowing society to set norms for the behavior of actors at all levels.⁷ As described by leading scholars in the field, strategic narratives enable political actors to “construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future,” thereby crafting the behavior of domestic and international actors.⁸ These structures are built using several classical storytelling structures, such as actors, plots, time, and space – utilizing events and identities to provoke shifts in opinion. Through the power of storytelling for persuasion, political leaders can influence the audience’s perception of a topic or event, manage their expectations for action, and shape future behavior.⁹

While much of the discourse around strategic political narratives focuses on how governments interact and influence each other, this tool is also essential for engaging

⁷ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Routledge Studies in Global Information, Politics and Society 3 (New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).

⁸ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle.

⁹ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle.

international public audiences. By utilizing a compelling narrative to describe an issue of interest, diplomatic leaders can capture the hearts and minds of the target public, therefore indirectly applying further pressure to national leaders to take predetermined actions. This path of influence could be critical in New Zealand's efforts to formally strengthen its trade relations with the US.

Strategic narratives offer a unique opportunity for diplomats to find common threads between the values and beliefs of countries. By uncovering where cultures align, government officials can appeal to the identity of their target audience, whether that is the public as a whole or a few high-level individuals. Prime Minister Ardern and her communications team should examine which narratives best highlight the shared cultural ideals with the broad US audience and utilize the narratives in external communications leading up to her meeting with President Biden.

To formulate an effective strategy, Ardern must consider how the narratives she selects fit within the overall cultural structure of the US public and reflect the significant themes of US identity.¹⁰ Additionally, the narratives must provide compelling explanations of New Zealand's goals and how they relate to the cultural norms and values of the US.¹¹ The core narrative genres – identity, system, and issue – provide potential opportunities for the US public to understand New Zealand's trade intentions as interrelated with core US values. Each of these genres will be defined and applied in the recommendations below.

Strategic narratives are only one piece of a successful communications strategy. In individual communications, frames help guide audiences to understand how they should interpret

¹⁰ Alex Schmid, "Al Qaeda's 'Single Narrative' and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives," *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies* 5 (January 1, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.19165/2014.1.01>.

¹¹ Schmid.

a specific message in the context of a more extensive discussion. While narratives are broad and are rooted in the sequencing of actions and events that link the past to the present and future, frames lack this sense of temporality.¹² Instead, frames are contextual, focusing on the implications of a message through the lens of various factors like emotion, bias, and individual identity.¹³

Robert Entman, a foundational scholar of framing, breaks down the effects of frames into four distinct steps.¹⁴ First, the frame defines the problem: what is happening in the world, and why is it bad? Next, the frame determines who or what is responsible for the problem: is the issue being caused by a country, political leader, organization, or other sources? The frame will then prompt an evaluation of the problem: are the actors engaged in this issue acting morally, and does the identified victim deserve this treatment? Finally, and most importantly to New Zealand's interest in this context, the frame presents a solution: what actions should be taken, and by who, to fix the problem? By elevating one or more of these factors, a frame persuades an audience to cast blame, make judgments on morality, and shape public opinion on the appropriate next steps.¹⁵

Although frames and narratives are different in their own rights, the most persuasive public diplomacy communication efforts marry these elements. The narrative works to weave the core issue into public discourse in a way that makes sense in the context of history, shared values, and the current state of play. Effective frames can elevate components of the narrative,

¹² Ilan Manor and Rhys Crilley, "Visually Framing the Gaza War of 2014: The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter," *Media, War & Conflict* 11, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 369–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635218780564>.

¹³ Manor and Crilley.

¹⁴ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>, p. 52.

¹⁵ Entman.

drawing from the context of the situation or audience identities involved. By making some aspects of reality more salient than others, the communicator can promote a particular perception of the issue, event, or situation that feeds into the overarching narrative.¹⁶ Effectively leveraged frames bring audiences together using culturally and socially significant tropes, thereby creating a sense of shared experience.

If Prime Minister Ardern can select the most appropriate narrative for the US audience and frame her remarks in an accessible and personally appropriate manner, she stands a realistic chance of gaining US public support for the desired bilateral trade deal. The following section will propose three potential narrative and framing pairings that Prime Minister Ardern could leverage in her comments to the US public in the lead-up to her slated conversations with President Biden.

Narrative and Frame Pairing Suggestions

Option 1: Global Free Trade

First, the New Zealand team should consider the efficacy of a system narrative. This narrative genre characterizes a nation's relationship with the rest of the world, identifying which global systems the country partakes in.¹⁷ This can take form in governance structures, international organizations, economic practices, or other identifying factors related to global hierarchies.¹⁸

By highlighting a global system that the US and New Zealand both participate in, Ardern can draw a connection between the countries for US audiences, signaling shared values. For

¹⁶ Entman.

¹⁷ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.

¹⁸ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle.

example, both the US and New Zealand have democratic governance structures. Highlighting this to the US audience helps make New Zealand seem familiar and centers the conversation of complicated diplomatic efforts around a simple shared value: free and fair elections should determine national leadership.

In the context of a potential bilateral economic agreement, New Zealand could successfully garner US public support by forging a narrative based on the shared value of free trade between the two countries. Emphasizing this similarity between the nations has the effect of defining New Zealand as a trustworthy trade partner, as well as heightening the urgency of the ask. The US public will want to see the US aid its friendly ally, as well as ensure the economic superpower is making a statement to the global community that free trade, a central American value, will not be tampered with.

This strategy leverages one of many overlapping core values, forging a space for framing that draws on the identity-based values of its American audience. A successful frame will amplify the shared value of free trade and cast a moral judgment that makes it imperative for the US to intervene. Table 1 highlights one example of a frame that fits into the proposed system narrative structure.

Table 1: Example of a free trade frame

Problem	New Zealand's ability to participate in the global free trade ecosystem is being threatened
Cause	The increasing global conflict between powerful nations
Moral Judgement	Global superpowers have the responsibility to ensure smaller, non-conflict related countries, like New Zealand, are given the opportunity to maintain a position within the broader free trade system

Solution	The US should sign a bilateral trade deal with New Zealand
-----------------	--

In her remarks, Ardern will want to highlight the different roles and responsibilities of the US in the global free trade ecosystem. She should frame the solution as being in the hands of the US and lead the audience to understand that helping small, free trade-dependent nations is in the US's national best interest. If successful, Ardern's rhetoric will persuade the audience to understand the US's role as a superpower in the global economy and urge the Biden Administration to step in to protect New Zealand and other "innocent" countries from facing threats of economic harm.

Other potential similar frames to support the free trade system narrative could focus on the importance of US goods in New Zealand's economy or highlight past moments of bilateral trade cooperation between the two nations.

Option 2: The US as a Humanitarian Nation

As mentioned in the previous recommendation, connecting with audience identity is crucial for gaining trust and support. Identity narratives seek to draw on the self-proclaimed characteristics of a nation to forge a shared understanding among the target audience.¹⁹ This narrative strategy also heavily relies on a temporal structure – taking national history into account when determining the most effective pathways for persuasion.

One of the US's foremost personal identifying factors is its status as the global superpower. With this great power comes a great sense of personal responsibility and a desire to uphold the US's reputation.²⁰ This broad identity encompasses a number of more US-specific

¹⁹ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle.

²⁰ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle.

characteristics, such as being an advocate for global democracy or its position as an essential partner in several key global agreements. One key identifier that could be useful to the Ardern team is the US's self-proclaimed status as a humanitarian nation.

While New Zealand is not remotely near becoming a country of global concern and condolence, like Ukraine is at the current moment, the US audience is sensitive to how the country's power is used, or not, for the betterment of our allies. By reaching out to the US public through the lens of humanitarian need, Ardern can leverage the audience's desire to uphold the US identity by persuading them to ask Biden to extend their generous aid to the small island nation.

Humanitarian narratives often play hand-in-hand with emotional framing techniques. Research shows that individuals are more likely to respond to emotion-based messages than facts or figures.²¹ Some facts will be vital for building the case in favor of a trade deal, such as New Zealand's level of import dependence and past economic success between the nations; however, Prime Minister Ardern should focus on crafting frames that target the hearts of the US audience over trying to solely persuade the minds.

The desire to help those in need is commonly tied to an individual's core values, a pivotal component to someone's identity as part of a larger "in-group" such as the US. By connecting core values to new opinions, communicators can persuade audiences to adopt emotionally motivated beliefs, creating long-term stable opinions.²² In this case, Prime Minister Ardern will want to leverage the US public's desire to help "less fortunate" or "less powerful" nations as

²¹ Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, Nachdr (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2008).

²² Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–69.

service is often a deeply rooted, emotionally bound value.²³ Table 2 provides a brief example of how this emotional lever can be implemented into a frame.

Table 2: Example of an emotional, humanitarian frame

Problem	New Zealand, a small non-confrontational import-dependent nation, is facing potential threats to its market due to international tensions it is not involved in, which could result in resource shortages and an economic downturn
Cause	The increasing global conflict between powerful nations
Moral Judgement	As a global superpower, the US has a humanitarian responsibility to protect “weaker” nations, like New Zealand, from bearing the burden of international conflicts they are not a part of
Solution	The US should sign a bilateral trade deal with New Zealand

Through this frame, the US public will understand the economic threats to New Zealand as a humanitarian concern for the Biden Administration. The emotional ties to both values of service to the global community and to the desire to uphold the US’s reputation as a global superpower have the potential to drive the public to bolster a stabilized trade agreement between the countries.

Option 3: Growing China Concerns

The final narrative genre that Prime Minister Ardern and her team should consider is the issue narrative. This narrative focuses on one individual event and its actors, placing it within the context of history and potential opportunities or threats.²⁴ Highlighting a salient current event

²³ Taber and Lodge.

²⁴ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.

within a communications strategy can help raise the profile of narratives that may not already be receiving attention from the mainstream public. This narrative genre is also valuable for assisting audiences in identifying the issue at hand as closely related to their country or self.

Ardern and her team could select a variety of current events, such as the resource issues stemming from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which demonstrates the need for a stabilized, free global economy. However, for the purpose of New Zealand's goals, leaders will want to highlight an issue that impacts both nations and is easily recognizable by the baseline public. In this case, Ardern will want to consider centering China's increasingly aggressive moves in the Indo-Pacific as the foremost concern for trade disruption in the region.

While the average American may not understand the specifics of US-China relations, a broad audience would likely be able to identify the historically tense relations between the countries. The issue narrative of rising Chinese aggression on the global stage demonstrates common footing and overlapping diplomatic concerns for New Zealand's and the US's wellbeing. An effective framing strategy will need to highlight the shared sense of urgency and the concern for local impact. One way to effectively persuade audiences is to bring the issue at hand "close to home." Proximity framing provides an opportunity to make the broad issue of Chinese economic aggression relevant to the US public.

There are two ways to interpret distance from an event or impact: physical and psychological.²⁵ Since China and New Zealand are physically far away from the US, proximity framing in this scenario would need to focus on convincing the US public that the events and dangerous impacts of Chinese aggression are growing closer to American shores.

²⁵ Yaacov Trope, Nira Liberman, and Cheryl Wakslak, "Construal Levels and Psychological Distance: Effects on Representation, Prediction, Evaluation, and Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Psychology : The Official Journal of the Society for Consumer Psychology* 17, no. 2 (2007): 83–95, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1057-7408\(07\)70013-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1057-7408(07)70013-X).

According to Construal Level Theory, issues processed as being closer in psychological distance are far more likely to be identified as salient, increasing the perception that the impacts are closer in time and more likely to occur.²⁶ Therefore, audiences that understand a defined “problem” as likely to impact them or their community are more likely to want to pursue preventative measures.

In her remarks, Ardern needs to make the potential effects of unregulated Chinese dominance seem like a real threat for both nations. Table 3 outlines a potential framing technique that maintains the bilateral agreement as a solution but identifies unbridled Chinese overreach in the region as a potential threat to all nations’ wellbeing, including the US.

Table 3: Example of a close proximity Chinese aggression frame

Problem	New Zealand, a small non-confrontational import-dependent nation, is facing potential threats to its market due to Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region
Cause	Growing aggressive nature of China’s economic dominance
Moral Judgement	Chinese aggression in the economic ecosystem and beyond will not slow down unless global superpowers like the US take a stand to protect themselves and their allies
Solution	The US should sign a bilateral trade deal with New Zealand to both aid the island nation and make a statement to the Chinese that the US stands with countries that support free trade and democracy.

It is important to note that neither this frame nor narrative aims to increase tension with China. Ardern does not want it to sound like she is aggressively stoking the flame toward a US-China conflict because that would ultimately be devastating for all involved. Instead, this

²⁶ Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak.

strategy aims to highlight existing tensions and provide a diplomatic solution that avoids direct engagement but sends a strong message that the US will protect those harmed in the wake of China's aggressive economic expansion efforts.

Conclusion:

Living in a globalized society has significant benefits, but it also means that global conflict can impact nations everywhere. New Zealand identified the potential trade implications of increased conflict in the Indo-Pacific region and is ready to take decisive diplomatic action. To best protect its people, interest, and critical import market, Prime Minister Ardern must explore all routes to securing a stable trade deal with President Biden, including persuading the broader American public.

By targeting US citizens, Ardern creates the opportunity for public pressure to influence decision-makers in the Biden White House. This method could realistically increase the probability of success, especially since a bilateral trade agreement of good intentions and wide public support could be an easy diplomatic win for Biden.

Ardern and her team must consider the significant narrative and framing choices embedded in her public remarks, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of American values and identity. Exposing the common ground between the US and New Zealand not only builds trust in the goodwill behind the deal, but it forges a connection that draws on emotionally bound ideals.

Each of the strategies described provides a pathway for successful message formation to be utilized across all public communication mediums, including speeches, op-eds, and press releases. The US media ecosystem is being subsumed by several pressing and devastating

stories, so strategic timing and placement will be essential in gaining traction. Presenting this story as a potential “feel good” event with a generally “unproblematic” partner nation could draw in positive attention and act as a break in a never-ending cycle of upsetting stories.

Prime Minister Ardern also has a large following on her social media accounts which offer important venues for direct communication with the public. Her team should shape copy and images that play into one or more of the proposed frameworks, ensuring that all external communication materials prop up the definitive overarching narrative. To ensure maximum reach to US users, Ardern should also consider interacting with American political figures on these platforms by engaging in public-facing dialogue.

Public diplomacy that bolsters storytelling, connection, and emotional impact offers a significant chance for New Zealand to safeguard its people and economy from the negative impacts of a rapidly changing world.

Bibliography

- Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.
- Inman, Phillip. "UK and New Zealand Sign Free Trade Deal." *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, sec. Business. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/feb/28/uk-and-new-zealand-sign-free-trade-deal>.
- Manor, Ilan, and Rhys Crilley. "Visually Framing the Gaza War of 2014: The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter." *Media, War & Conflict* 11, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 369–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635218780564>.
- Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge Studies in Global Information, Politics and Society 3. New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.
- "New Zealand, China to Upgrade Free Trade Deal in April." Accessed April 30, 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/new-zealand-china-to-upgrade-free-trade-deal-in-april/2503428>.
- "New Zealand Defence Forces Warn of Rising Threat From China in Indo-Pacific | World News | US News." Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-12-08/new-zealand-defence-forces-warn-of-rising-threat-from-china-in-indo-pacific>.
- "NZ Trade Policy | New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade." Accessed April 30, 2022. <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/nz-trade-policy/>.

Schmid, Alex. "Al Qaeda's 'Single Narrative' and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives."

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies 5 (January 1, 2014).

<https://doi.org/10.19165/2014.1.01>.

Taber, Charles S., and Milton Lodge. "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political

Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–69.

Trade, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and. "United States of America." New Zealand

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Accessed April 30, 2022.

<https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/countries-and-regions/americas/united-states-of-america/>.

Trope, Yaacov, Nira Liberman, and Cheryl Wakslak. "Construal Levels and Psychological

Distance: Effects on Representation, Prediction, Evaluation, and Behavior." *Journal of*

Consumer Psychology : The Official Journal of the Society for Consumer Psychology 17,

no. 2 (2007): 83–95. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1057-7408\(07\)70013-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1057-7408(07)70013-X).

Westen, Drew. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*.

Nachdr. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2008.