

New Zealand military to join occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan

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Following a series of high-level rebukes and trade retaliation by the Bush administration over critical statements made by the New Zealand prime minister of the Iraq war, the Labour government has decided to send troops and army engineers to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Helen Clark announced last week that 60 defence force engineers will be sent to help “rebuild” Iraq and a contingent of 100 armed soldiers to operate alongside so-called “provincial reconstruction teams” in Afghanistan. The troops will join New Zealand soldiers already on mine-clearing duty in Iraq and may be further boosted by the return of a navy frigate to the Gulf of Oman as well as an Orion reconnaissance aircraft.

Washington immediately moderated weeks of diplomatic hostilities, warmly welcoming the decision as a “meaningful contribution”. State Department spokesman Phillip Reeker declared that New Zealand had demonstrated a “strong and abiding” commitment as a “partner in the struggle against terrorism.”

The deployment reverses previous undertakings by Clark that her government would not send “peacekeepers” to Iraq except as part of an official UN mission. The army engineers, who will be based in southern Iraq, will operate under the direct control of the British—the joint invading force and occupying power. In her statement to parliament, Clark attempted to deny there was any inconsistency, claiming New Zealand had always been prepared to join in post-war operations so long as there was “appropriate multilateral cover”.

According to Clark, the required “cover” was provided by UN Security Council resolution 1483, which recognised the US and Britain as occupying powers in Iraq and opened the door for other nations to provide “humanitarian and reconstruction” work. Clark argued that the UN resolution—for which New Zealand had “lobbied and advocated”—provided a “very sound legal basis” for the deployments.

In fact, the government’s troop commitment flowed directly out of the decision by France and Germany to support the UN resolution. Prior to this, New Zealand’s position on the invasion of Iraq had been dictated by a certain anxiety within ruling circles to sustain a careful balancing act between its major trading partners in the US and Australia on the one hand, and Europe on the other. When the French government performed its *volte-face*, insisting the priority was to “look to the future”, and Germany’s ambassador to the UN declared “[w]e can’t undo history”, the New Zealand government seized its chance to fall into line.

Clark swiftly received plaudits from the local media. The *New Zealand Herald*, which had previously admonished Clark for her “unnecessary” taunting of the US over the war, declared the government had “positioned New Zealand well”. Observing that while the UN had been correct to declare there was no real and urgent threat from Saddam Hussein to justify the US-led invasion, it was “sensible” that the UN should now endorse participation in the “country’s repair”. It would have been “churlish in the extreme” to refuse to help with “reconstruction” simply because the US and Britain had acted in defiance of the UN Security Council.

Most significantly, according to the *Herald*, a by-product of the government’s decision to do the “right thing in Iraq” would be to “repair our standing in Washington”. This was urgent and necessary because the US remained “the ultimate defender of our way of life”, the “dominant economy” and vital to “global trade, aid, health and environmental agreements”.

In the second week of the US-led invasion, Clark had infuriated Bush administration officials with an off-the-cuff observation that if Democrat Al Gore had been elected president, the war might not have happened. Pressured by White House threats that it would blacklist New Zealand in forthcoming free trade talks, Clark was

forced to apologise to Bush for any “offence” she had caused.

Clark’s grudging apology was, however, insufficient to settle the matter. In late May Robert Zoellick, a Bush administration trade official, told the US House of Representatives Agriculture Committee that a free trade deal between the US and New Zealand was not on the agenda. Not only were many of New Zealand’s agricultural exports to the US “sensitive” to American farmers, there were “some things done recently that would make it harder to carry [a deal] through Congress”.

The following day, the *Herald* carried a front-page report quoting an un-named US government spokesman who confirmed that Clark’s comments about Gore had been the “final straw” costing New Zealand any chance of securing a free trade deal. The spokesman—believed to be Phillip Wall, the deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Wellington—claimed that the prime minister’s remarks amounted to a “personal attack” on Bush and were considered in Washington to be “beyond the call”.

The affair caused intense consternation in New Zealand ruling circles. An editorial in the *Herald* described the official’s remarks as constituting an “extraordinarily strong” attack on Clark. The editorial denounced “this sort of destabilisation” as coming close to interfering in the country’s affairs, “exactly what the US takes exception to.” The US Embassy in turn issued a formal statement, not repudiating the charge, but linking the demise of the trade agreement to a range of factors including “political, security and other elements of the bilateral relationship”.

The statement was taken as an explicit move by the Bush White House to go much further than previous US administrations in connecting trade issues to foreign policy and “security” matters. Alarmed at the turn of events, Jim Anderton, the third-ranked cabinet minister and leader of the Progressive Party in the governing coalition, declared that the US was taking an “unfair, punitive” attitude to New Zealand, one that smacked of “bullying”. He went on to attack the earlier statement by the un-named US official as “palpably an attempt to influence opinion in this country against the prime minister”.

Behind the scenes, however, the government was rapidly yielding to US pressure. Anderton prepared the way by pointing to New Zealand’s contribution to 33 UN “peacekeeping” operations since 1952. He claimed that per head of population, the country had sent more of its military personnel on overseas missions than most other

countries, including the US. According to Anderton, New Zealand had proved its willingness to “pull its weight in international affairs”, and deserved “a little more respect and consideration”.

When Clark announced the troop deployment two weeks later, she vigorously denied it had anything to do with pacifying the US. It was, she said “100 percent about New Zealand being a good international citizen”. While Defence Force planning for further operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan had been under way for some time, Clark emphasised that the government’s actions would be “seen in a very positive light by others who happen to think these are important issues”.

What remains largely unsaid is that New Zealand’s ruling elite has definite economic and strategic interests of its own. Notwithstanding its criticisms of the war, the Labour government celebrated the US victory, with Clark asserting that a “stable” Middle East would be “good for a meat-producing nation like New Zealand”. Before the war, Iraq had been a “good market” for New Zealand. In its aftermath, Clark predicted “a lot of foreign money going in to rebuild capacity” which could provide substantial opportunities for New Zealand business.

Clark’s troop deployment has nothing to do with “peacekeeping” or “rebuilding Iraq”. Despite the small numbers involved, the New Zealand Labour government has telegraphed its support for the neo-colonial occupation of Iraq at the very point where Bush and Blair are facing growing criticism internationally as well as mounting popular resistance inside Iraq. The significance of the country’s involvement was highlighted by the *Herald*, which expressed the hope that the more “non-combatant” countries participated in restoring “law and order” in Iraq, the “more acceptable Western occupation may be”.



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