US offers closer defence links with New Zealand

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The United States has signalled that it wants to revive its military ties with New Zealand by putting aside a 20-year dispute about visits by nuclear-propelled warships to the country's ports. In an interview published in the *Australian Financial Review* on May 8, Christopher Hill, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, foreshadowed a stronger relationship with New Zealand under the ANZUS alliance, which also covers Australia.

The interview came two weeks after a visit by New Zealand Defence Minister Phil Goff to Washington for talks with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and senior Pentagon officials. In his remarks, Hill politely labelled New Zealand's 1985 anti-nuclear legislation "a relic" that should be quarantined. "Rather than trying to change each other's minds on the nuclear issue... I think we should focus on things we can make work," he said. According to Hill, the US would not demand to "put ships back into New Zealand".

The practical consequences would mean dealing with issues "within the military-to-military relationship" and looking for things "we could do together," Hill said. Last year New Zealand was granted a special US presidential waiver to be involved in a joint naval exercise with US forces for the first time in 20 years. The new moves are likely see New Zealand re-included to an intelligence-sharing arrangement between the US, Britain, Canada and Australia.

The ANZUS pact, established after World War II, was for nearly 40 years the key strategic partnership between the US and its two allies in the southwest Pacific. Along with the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), it provided a diplomatic platform for US imperialist operations in the region during the height of the Cold War. ANZUS was used as the basis for the involvement of Australian and New Zealand troops in the Vietnam War.

While ANZUS has never been formally dissolved, New Zealand effectively ceased to be a part of the alliance after the introduction of the anti-nuclear law in 1985. The US refused to maintain active defence ties as long as nuclear propelled or armed ships were refused entry to New Zealand ports. ANZUS remained the basis for the continuing close collaboration between the US and Australian militaries.

New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance goes back to the early 1970s when the Kirk Labour government used it as a foreign policy measure to oppose French activities in the Pacific. It was a tactical move to protect New Zealand's own imperialist interests in the region as France extended its nuclear testing program at Mururoa Atoll to include atmospheric tests.

The policy was resurrected in the mid-1980s by the Labour government as part of its efforts to provide a superficially "left" façade while its pro-market assault on working people was gathering pace. Appealing to concerns about the danger of nuclear weapons, Prime Minister David Lange declared that New Zealand would have an "independent" foreign policy. In the face of diplomatic bullying by the US and Australia, Lange's policy gained considerable public support.

During the Cold War, New Zealand, a minor imperialist power, could maintain the semblance of independence without any risk to its interests. Since then, however, the growth of great power rivalries has produced a much less certain environment. Increasingly, Wellington has required the backing of Australia and the US to bolster its position in the southwest Pacific. In the aftermath of September 11, Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark rapidly clambered on board the Bush's administration's "war on terrorism," committing New Zealand troops to the US-

led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The pay off has been US steps toward renewed defence ties.

In his remarks to the *Australian Financial Review*, Hill also flagged Washington's intention to revisit discussions over a free trade agreement "and see what it does for our respective economies". Labour's moves have been applauded by New Zealand business, which is desperate to secure a free-trade deal with the US—the country's second largest export market after Australia. Two-way trade between the countries is currently worth $US5.8 billion.

Richard Armitage, former deputy secretary of state during President Bush's first term, was more explicit in remarks in the Asian edition of the *Wall Street Journal* earlier this year. Armitage, who had been critical of New Zealand's foreign policy, declared that there was no need for "an overly punitive approach" or to maintain a ban on joint military exercises.

Armitage suggested that New Zealand could work more closely with the US in the South Pacific and in patrolling the Malacca Straits, between Malaysia and Indonesia. "New Zealand has demonstrated its commitment to spreading freedom. New Zealand Defence Forces have played a vital role in the war against terror in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere," he wrote, expressing the hope that the US could "work with this like-minded ally in further missions."

The Clark government's embrace of the Bush administration and its predatory policies in the Middle East and Central Asia is a measure of Labour's rightward trajectory. In the face of widespread opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq, Clark attempted to maintain a certain distance from Washington, declining to join the "coalition of the willing", and only later providing military engineers to bolster the occupation.

During the 2005 elections, Labour cabinet ministers painted opposition National Party leader Don Brash as an American lapdog for suggesting the anti-nuclear law should be put to a referendum. They accused him of trying to sell out New Zealand's "iconic" policy to get better market access. Calls by former US ambassador Charles Swindells to re-discuss the issue were also dismissed by government spokespeople as an attempt to interfere in New Zealand's domestic affairs. The National Party was eventually forced to publicly ditch its proposal.

All this, however, was aimed to throw dust in the eyes of the electorate—even at that time, diplomatic discussions had been going on behind the scenes. Immediately after the elections, Clark installed Winston Peters, the leader of the minority right-wing populist New Zealand First party, as foreign affairs minister in return for his party's support in parliament. In an extraordinary step, Peters assumed the foreign affairs post while remaining formally outside cabinet and thus its strict discipline.

Peters, with Clark's approval, immediately announced that his key objective was to restore the US relationship. He used his first major speech to appeal to the Bush administration to acknowledge New Zealand's significant role in Pacific "security". This opened the way for Goff, who had been moved to the defence portfolio to make way for Peters, to put what the *New Zealand Herald* called previously "undiscussable" issues concerning US defence ties on the table.

According to an approving commentary by the *Herald's* columnist Fran O'Sullivan, six months after the election, the "major fault lines" that had appeared to exist between Labour and National on foreign policy are now "rapidly closing". In return for supporting US militarism around the world, New Zealand is seeking Washington's backing for its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. That is the character of the new "ties" being developed with the Bush administration.