

US ends 25-year defence rift with New Zealand

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used her visit to New Zealand between November 4 and 6 to formally end a 25-year foreign policy rift and restore the two countries' military relationship. Clinton announced the "normalisation" of relations more than two decades after the US largely severed defence ties in reprisal for New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation.

Clinton's three-day visit to New Zealand was the longest by any US Secretary of State for a decade. NZ Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully described it as "turning a new page". Clinton and McCully signed the "Wellington Declaration"—a document that commits the two countries to a new "strategic partnership", including regular ministerial contact, co-operation in areas such as nuclear non-proliferation and trade, and annual "political-military" talks.

Significantly, there will be a new focus on "practical cooperation" in the Pacific region, which has been singled out as a priority. This follows a review of New Zealand-US relations early this year that resulted in an acknowledgement by the US that the relationship had "under-performed" over the past two decades.

Clinton's visit, held en route to talks in Australia as part of a two-week tour of the region, came amid increasing US concern over China's growing diplomatic, naval and financial influence in the Asia-Pacific. The issue of "security" in the Pacific was flagged as high on Clinton's agenda, with the White House alarmed that the Australian and New Zealand governments have allowed China to assert its interests in the region virtually unchallenged.

The US has recently opened a USAID office in the Fijian capital, Suva, thus repudiating both Canberra and Wellington's attempts to isolate the Fijian military dictatorship. According to one academic, the policy of isolation had only succeeded in "opening all sorts of new opportunities for non-traditional players"—namely China, which has proceeded to develop economic and military relations with Fiji.

In Washington's offensive to round up support among its "friends" and allies to counter the emergence of China, New Zealand's anti-nuclear credentials have suddenly become useful. The Obama administration has tacked away from the confrontational posturing of its predecessor, and is employing the trappings of multilateralism to sustain US military hegemony. Prime Minister John Key was one of 40 leaders invited to President Obama's Nuclear Security Summit in Washington in April. In the guise of promoting disarmament and opposing terrorism, Obama sought to line up international support for his administration's ongoing campaign against Iran and North Korea. While in Wellington, Clinton made a point of saying the US was "particularly grateful" for New Zealand's "leadership" on nuclear non-proliferation.

New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance originated in the early 1970s when the Kirk Labour government used it as a foreign policy measure to oppose French activities in the Pacific. Involving no issues of principle whatsoever, it was a tactical move to protect New Zealand's imperialist interests in the region under conditions where France was extending 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.

When nuclear armed and powered US ships were prevented from entering the country's ports, the US broke off military relations. The ANZUS pact, which for some 40 years had formed the basis of defence ties between Washington, Australia and New Zealand in the post-war period, including during the Vietnam War, became defunct. Not all contact, however, was severed. The Waihopai electronic spy base, an integral part of the US international surveillance system, operated throughout the diplomatic freeze.

The anti-nuclear legislation has always served as a cover behind which New Zealand has continued to function as a minor imperialist power in the region. In the recent period, New Zealand troops and police have participated in occupations in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, alongside ongoing interference in the affairs of other regional states, including Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. The strategic and economic interests of the New Zealand ruling elite have been relentlessly pursued by trampling on the sovereignty of tiny Pacific nations.

While in the 1970s and 1980s New Zealand could maintain a semblance of independence, it has increasingly required the backing of Australia and the US to maintain its position in the southwest Pacific.

The National Party government, and its Labour predecessor, have for some time been seeking a rapprochement with Washington. As a *quid-pro-quo*, New Zealand has bent over backwards to be a reliable and pliant ally in the so-called “war on terror”. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Labour Party, with the support of its coalition partner, the Alliance, was among the first to offer military support to the invasion of Afghanistan.

The move soon paid dividends. In 2002 Clark became the first NZ Labour prime minister to be invited to Washington in 20 years. At the end of the visit, then secretary of state, Colin Powell, fulsomely praised New Zealand’s international role, and declared the two countries were once again “very, very, very good friends”. Because of widespread popular hostility, Prime Minister Helen Clark distanced herself from formal identification with the war in Iraq, but nevertheless sent army engineers and warships to help enforce the US-led occupation.

Clark used a second visit in 2007 to further ingratiate herself with the Bush White House and align her government with its criminal policies of militarism and neo-colonialism. As a consequence, a thaw in relations, nurtured by the Labour government, has been underway for some time.

This theme was underscored by Clinton who noted that in respect to foreign interventions, New Zealand was a country that “punches way above its weight in every sector of challenge in the world today”. Clinton declared to a 300-strong audience in Christchurch that she hoped New Zealand would extend the mission of its elite SAS special forces soldiers in Afghanistan. “We have a high regard for New Zealand and the troops that you deploy there, of course we would like them to stay as long as you have them stay”, the secretary of state told a TVNZ interview. She revealed she had discussed both New Zealand’s deployment of the SAS and a 140-strong provincial reconstruction team in talks with Key.

A New Zealand government defence White Paper released the week before Clinton’s visit, while playing lip-service to upholding an “independent” line on foreign policy, placed renewed emphasis on the New Zealand-US defence relationship. The paper emphasised that New Zealand would be “an engaged, active and stalwart” partner of the US. In his talks with Clinton, Key drew particular attention to the White Paper’s commitment to beef up “frontline” military capability.

Spokesmen for both sides hailed the Wellington Declaration as evidence that both countries had turned their backs on the row over New Zealand’s anti-nuclear legislation. Clinton signalled that there would now be discussions about how to step up military contact, including more exercises, joint training and officer exchanges. According to the official communiqué, there will also be “enhanced political and subject-matter expert dialogue—including regular foreign ministers’ meetings and political-military discussions”. Defence Minister Wayne Mapp told the *New Zealand Herald* he expected “full blown military exercises” between the two countries within a year.

The entire New Zealand political establishment supports the new relationship with the US. The Labour Party opposition has made no criticism of the Wellington Declaration, while the foreign affairs spokesman for the Greens, Keith Locke, marked the occasion by boasting that “Hillary” had accepted a “nuclear free NZ” badge from him.

Business spokesmen and political pundits are now assessing the chances of a breakthrough in free trade negotiations on the back of the thaw in diplomatic tensions. What is certain, however, is that the new arrangement will pave the way for widening neo-colonial operations and anti-Chinese actions by the US and its assorted allies throughout the Asia-Pacific.



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