

New Zealand signs new defence agreement with US

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The New Zealand government sealed a comprehensive defence treaty with the United States last month, further upgrading military ties between the two countries. The Washington Declaration was signed at the Pentagon on June 20 by New Zealand Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman, Chief of Defence Force Lieutenant General Rhys Jones and US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta.

The agreement purports to establish greater co-operation in maritime security, counter-terrorism, anti-piracy measures, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and multilateral “peace-keeping support initiatives” in the Pacific region.

In reality, the pact formalises the basis for joint military intervention as part of the Obama administration’s build-up throughout Asia against China. The pact was signed a week after commemorative events in New Zealand to mark the 70th anniversary of the stationing of US forces in the country during World War II.

The agreement will intensify the basic dilemma confronting the New Zealand ruling elite over how to balance growing economic ties with China against its longstanding strategic dependence on the US.

Since 2008, New Zealand’s exports to China have risen by more than 160 percent, supplanting the US as the country’s second largest export market after Australia. However, this increasing economic reliance on China is threatened by the Obama administration’s aggressive stance toward China. Like other regional allies, New Zealand has come under pressure from Washington as the US seeks to consolidate alliances,

military bases and diplomatic arrangements to encircle and contain China.

The new US-NZ pact builds on the 2010 Wellington Declaration, signed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a visit to New Zealand, which was declared to be a “new strategic partnership”. That agreement ended a 25-year standoff between the two countries after New Zealand banned nuclear armed or powered vessels in the mid-1980s.

The Wellington Declaration provided for the resumption of direct military contact, including exercises, joint training and officer exchanges. These commenced in April, with 70 US military personnel arriving to conduct exercises with the NZ army. In turn, the first contingent of New Zealand soldiers last month began training at a Marine Combat Center in the US. Official US Army pictures showed the armed troops practising “urban patrolling, crowd control and other counter-insurgency principles” against Arabic “villains” in the California desert.

New Zealand Defence Minister Coleman said the relationship with the US had “advanced significantly” since the Wellington Declaration, and even further after Prime Minister John Key visited Washington last year. Panetta and Coleman had met in Singapore early in June, at the Shangri-La Dialogue conference, where Panetta announced US plans to increase its naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region to 60 percent of its total fleet over the next decade.

This month, for the first time in 28 years, New Zealand ships are joining the world’s largest international naval exercise, the five-week Rim of the

Pacific (RIMPAC) war games, hosted by the US off Hawaii. The exercise is bigger than the previous one two years ago. According to the US Navy, the exercise is oriented towards “ensuring the safety of sea lanes”—a euphemism for Washington’s preparations to control key choke points such the Strait of Malacca, vital to China’s export and import trade, including oil supplies. The 22 countries participating in RIMPAC include many openly or tacitly joining the US “ring” against China—Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

The US-NZ agreement follows a similar pact between New Zealand and NATO. The Individual Partnership Cooperation Programme, signed in Brussels on June 4 by Key and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, enables NZ troops to operate as part of future NATO-led military interventions, perhaps in Syria or Iran. According to Rasmussen, such partnerships are “essential to NATO’s success”. New Zealand is simultaneously seeking international support for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2015-16.

Coleman rejected suggestions the Washington Declaration represented a return to the 40-year ANZUS alliance, which was effectively nullified by New Zealand’s anti-nuclear policy. He insisted that the new agreement affirmed the country’s “independent” foreign policy.

Victoria University Professor Robert Ayson commented: “At a time when China’s growing influence is the major regional trend, some observers will see the Declaration as evidence of New Zealand’s growing alignment with Washington rather than a sign of what the Key government refers to as New Zealand’s independent foreign policy.”

The opposition Labour Party welcomed the declaration, endorsing the government’s claim of pursuing an “independent” foreign policy. “The days are long gone where New Zealand simply follows the position of any other nation, whether it is the UK, Australia or the US,” foreign affairs spokesman Phil Goff said.

The brief period during which New Zealand paraded its “independent” foreign policy stance came to an end under the Labour government of 1999-2008, in which Goff served as a foreign affairs minister and a defence minister. To secure backing for New Zealand imperialism’s interests in the Pacific, Labour, in partnership with Alliance and the Greens, sent troops to support US wars in the Middle East, and Australian interventions in the Pacific. The involvement of NZ troops in East Timor, followed by the US-led neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, paved the way for the normalisation of military ties with the US.

US imperialism is recklessly stepping up its use of military might to offset its economic decline and maintain its global dominance at the expense of its rivals. The latest agreement ensures that New Zealand will operate in lockstep with the US, making the country a potential target in any new conflict.



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