

New Zealand to increase military presence in South Pacific

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New Zealand is preparing to increase its military presence in the South Pacific, in close collaboration with the Australian government. The moves further align the two regional imperialist powers with the US Obama administration's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific and its aggressive confrontation of China.

The New Zealand government announced its plans following an inaugural meeting of regional defence ministers and military chiefs in Tonga on May 2-3. The meeting covered cooperation on maritime security, disaster relief coordination and military exercises.

New Zealand observers will be embedded in the American-led "Talisman Sabre" exercises in Queensland and the Coral Sea later this year, the first time that NZ forces will have been involved with a joint US-Australia training operation since the 1985 split in the ANZUS alliance over the NZ's anti-nuclear legislation. New Zealand also signed a treaty with Tonga, to enable greater military inter-operability.

According to a report in the *New Zealand Herald* on May 4, the regional defence grouping, which will meet annually, is being "driven by Australia". The United States and Britain were invited as observers, but China and Japan were "left off the guest list". No other Asian countries were invited. The main participants were Australia, New Zealand, France and Chile. Only two Pacific Island states were present—Tonga and Papua New Guinea. Fiji, which is under military rule and remains targeted by Australian and NZ sanctions, was excluded.

The line-up represented the imperialist powers that have historically dominated the South Pacific, all of which have ongoing strategic and economic interests they are determined to protect. Australia and New Zealand have repeatedly intervened in East Timor and Solomon Islands. Papua New Guinea—a former

Australian colony—is treated as a client state by Canberra. New Zealand maintains effective possession of Niue, Tokelau and the Cook Islands. France maintains colonial possessions, including Tahiti and nickel-rich New Caledonia, where a French military garrison is stationed.

Chile was invited because it has several dependencies in the Pacific, including Easter Island, and a maritime economic zone covering more than 4.5 million square kilometres.

All are joining the Obama administration's offensive against Beijing's influence in the region. In January, the *Dominion Post* reported on a visit to Fiji by a senior Chinese defence official, Major General Qian Lihua, who promised "extensive but undisclosed" aid to the Fijian military. The trip followed a visit last September by a top-level Chinese delegation to strengthen Beijing's relations with Fiji, as a counter to growing US pressure. Later this month, Fijian regime leader Frank Bainimarama is visiting Beijing to meet Premier Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping.

The *Dominion Post* noted that Fiji has a territorial dispute with Tonga that impinges on a NZ continental shelf claim, and argued absurdly that China's offer of military aid to Fiji was a "dangerous escalation" that posed an "unusual military threat" to New Zealand.

The Pacific is strategically significant, having been a major theatre of conflict in World War II. Australia and New Zealand, along with the US, consider the region to be their "backyard". They have extensive trade and tourism relations with Pacific countries and still use island peoples as a source of cheap labour. Territorial claims over vast marine tracts are emerging around fishing and exploration rights.

Before the meeting in Tonga, Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith met his New Zealand

counterpart Jonathan Coleman to brief him on Canberra's Defence White Paper, released on May 3. The paper is aimed at providing unconditional backing to Washington as it intensifies the encirclement of China in preparation for a military confrontation.

In the South Pacific, Australia will rely significantly on New Zealand's co-operation. The White Paper noted New Zealand's increasing military capabilities, and its involvement with Australia through initiatives such as the Anzac ready response force. "New Zealand is the country we are most likely to conduct operations with in the South Pacific, exemplified by our combined operations in East Timor and Solomon Islands, and in support of the 2012 Papua New Guinea elections," the paper stated.

New Zealand's military integration with the US and Australia is the culmination of a process begun by the previous Labour government, which committed troops to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. In a 2010 visit to Wellington, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the "normalisation" of relations between the US and NZ. She signed the Wellington Declaration, signalling a new "strategic partnership", with a focus on "practical cooperation" in the Pacific region.

Clinton's successor, Leon Panetta, made a follow-up sweep through the region last year, and committed US marines to train NZ forces to "help us in providing for the security of the Asia-Pacific region." He declared that the Obama administration would be "more than ready" to station marines in New Zealand, as it is now doing in northern Australia.

As Wellington strengthens its military ties with the US, it faces an increasingly fraught dilemma. China has overtaken Australia as New Zealand's top market. Exports to China in the March quarter were \$2.3 billion, compared with those to Australia of \$2.2 billion. Twenty percent of exports, predominantly wood and dairy products, now go to China. Prime Minister John Key's government is simultaneously encouraging more direct investment from China to shore up economic activity.

Approval for the sale of 16 farms to a Chinese company last year exposed sharp divisions within the ruling elite over where to line up in the rivalry between Beijing and Washington. The opposition Labour Party, the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana movement and

the anti-immigrant NZ First denounced the sale and, with the support of the pseudo-left groups, attempted to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment. NZ First leader Winston Peters used a four-day forum attended by 70 delegates from 22 Pacific countries earlier this month to demagogically warn them against "the seduction of China".

Prime Minister Key, however, recently told an Auckland business audience that New Zealand's economic future would "largely be an Asian story for the next 20 years or so". Highlighting his trip to Beijing in April, Key emphasised the work his government had put into "building relationships" with China, claiming it could be derailed by the opposition parties, particularly by the Greens, who have adopted a stridently anti-China stance.

Key's visit to China only served to underline the precarious manoeuvring under way. Asked whether NZ troops would join the US and Australia if they went to war against North Korea—a Chinese ally—Key replied that New Zealand had "a long and proud history of coming to the support of South Korea ... Taken to the extreme, and without interventions and resolutions to the issues, that is of course possible."

This provoked a furore in the NZ media, with Key criticised for needlessly endangering the country's relationship with Beijing. His remarks, however, underscore that NZ imperialism is dependent on its close relationship with the US, without which it could not maintain its predatory operations in the South Pacific.



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