

New Zealand-US military exercise rehearses for Pacific war

Tom Peters**19 November 2013**

The New Zealand province of South Canterbury is currently hosting the country's largest ever international military exercise. Operation Southern Katipo, an amphibious war game being staged throughout November, involves 2,000 NZ troops, along with forces from the United States, Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Singapore and Tonga.

The operation cements the complete restoration of New Zealand's military alliance with the US as part of the Obama administration's strategic "pivot" or "rebalancing" to the Indo-Pacific to encircle China, which the US views as a threat to its dominance in the region. Smaller exercises were held with the US last year, marking the first time American troops had trained in NZ since a partial rift during the 1980s over Wellington's anti-nuclear policy.

Washington is moving 60 percent of its navy into the Indo-Pacific, has stationed Marines in northern Australia, and has encouraged countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan to escalate their territorial disputes with China.

The New Zealand exercise follows July's US-Australian "Talisman Saber" war games, at which NZ observers were present. A report released this month by the US think tank, the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, which has close ties with the Pentagon, emphasised the strategic importance of Australian bases and intelligence infrastructure in the event of war with China.

Operation Southern Katipo is further evidence that New Zealand's ruling elite is dragging the country into Washington's preparations for war—without any democratic discussion and behind the backs of the population. Despite the exercise's scale, it has received little coverage in the media.

While the National Party government claims that military "interoperability" with the US is needed to provide humanitarian relief, combat piracy and join "peacekeeping" operations, Southern Katipo is explicitly preparing for aggressive military interventions.

A NZ Defence Force statement explained that in the operation's scenario, South Canterbury is a fictional South West Pacific country in which an ousted prime minister, "backed by a militia," was "refusing to recognise election results." A coalition of countries formed an "International Stability Mission" to "restore law and order."

Local media reports indicate that the district of Timaru, population 42,000, was "invaded" by heavily armed troops. The *Timaru Herald* urged its readers not to panic "if you are suddenly confronted by the sight of troops swarming ashore or planes dropping parachutists."

Operation Southern Katipo follows a visit by Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman to Washington last month, where he reaffirmed his government's support for the US "pivot." In a joint press conference with US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, Coleman declared: "Our troops have fought together in many theatres around the world, most recently in Afghanistan, and ... we are looking forward to future cooperation with the US." Coleman added that he and Hagel "talked extensively about the US rebalance to our part of the world. New Zealand certainly welcomes that."

Coleman also indicated support for the US National Security Agency's (NSA) global spying, exposed by whistle-blower Edward Snowden. Asked if he was concerned that the NSA could be monitoring Wellington, following revelations it spied on at least 35 world leaders, Coleman replied: "New Zealand's not

worried at all about this ... quite frankly, there'd be nothing that anyone could hear in our private conversations that we wouldn't be prepared to share publicly."

As part of the US-led "Five Eyes" spy network, New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) shares vast amounts of intelligence with the NSA, as well as the security agencies of Britain, Canada and Australia. The GCSB's Waihopai spy base is an integral part of the NSA's global X-Keyscore intelligence gathering program.

Following Snowden's revelations last month that Australian embassies throughout Asia function as listening posts for the NSA, New Zealand Prime Minister John Key refused to comment on whether NZ embassies were involved.

Key insisted that any NZ spying was "legal," but earlier this year it was revealed that, under successive National and Labour governments, the GCSB illegally spied on New Zealand residents, including Internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom. In the face of overwhelming public opposition, the government passed laws to legalise the domestic spying and expand GCSB's powers to intercept private communications.

While the entire political establishment supports the military and intelligence alliance with the US, sections of the NZ ruling elite have warned the government to avoid alienating China, which is the country's number one trading partner. Commenting on Coleman's trip, a *New Zealand Herald* editorial noted that Obama's "rebalancing" to Asia was "viewed with some alarm in Beijing." It stated: "New Zealand wants to build its relationship with Washington, a natural ally, but it must do this while at the same time retaining good relations with Beijing."

The government has repeatedly declared that it does not need to "take sides" between the US and China. This position is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, however, particularly with US involvement in an exercise on the scale of Operation Southern Katipo.

Labour and the Greens fully support the US alliance. The 1999-2008 Labour government restored ties by dispatching troops to assist the illegal occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Labour and the Greens both stated their support for a US bombing of Syria. In April, when Prime Minister Key declared that he would support a US-led attack on North Korea, Greens co-

leader Russel Norman told Radio NZ that such a war would need to be "within the UN charter."

None of the opposition parties has in any way criticised Operation Southern Katipo and have been silent about its implications for the working class in New Zealand and throughout the Asian region.



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