

NZ-US military exercise rehearses for incursion into Pacific

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The New Zealand defence force's biggest exercise, codenamed Southern Katipo, is underway until November 27 in the Nelson region of the South Island. The biennial, month-long war games involve more than 2,000 military personnel from New Zealand, the US, Australia, Canada, the French Armed Forces of New Caledonia, other Pacific Islands nations and the United Kingdom. Planes, helicopters, ships, light armoured vehicles and landing craft have been mobilised.

The war games are an explicit rehearsal for an armed incursion into a South Pacific country to quell civil unrest and impose military order. The north of the South Island has been designated a fictitious Pacific Island nation called the Republic of Becara. It is deemed to be on the brink of collapse and the UN has given a mandate for international intervention. New Zealand troops have been deployed to lead a multinational force tasked with restoring "order."

The operation further cements New Zealand's military alliance with the US, as part of the Obama administration's strategic "pivot to Asia" against China. Following recent provocations, including the intrusion by the USS Lassen into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea, the exercise serves as a blunt warning to Pacific countries that they could be invaded if they stray too close to China.

Speaking to reporters before last weekend's East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister John Key declared that New Zealand "isn't taking sides" in the South China Sea dispute. Given the importance of Asia as a market, he emphasised the need for a "peaceful solution."

The current military operation, however, is further evidence that New Zealand's ruling elite is dragging the country, behind the backs of the population, into Washington's preparations for war. Former US

military analyst Paul Buchanan pointed out on Radio Live on October 29 that, because of its alliance with the US, New Zealand could easily be drawn into a conflict over the South China Sea that "may force us to confront [China] militarily." He warned that such a war could start "inadvertently."

Lead military planner for Southern Katipo, Colonel Martin Dransfield, described the exercise as a response to an imagined "failing state." Outlining the scenario, he said: "A previous strong economy, the forestry, the coal, the gold mining are now not as successful so therefore you've got high unemployment which leads to a breakdown in law and order, criminal activity, which is then exploited for political reasons so it ends up with militia-type groups."

The exercise is also a warning to the New Zealand working class, as it simulates rising social unrest locally. Members of the public have been encouraged to take part by "playing along" with the storyline when the troops arrive. In Murchison, one woman posted a message on Facebook alleging she was assaulted by soldiers during a staged protest in which some participants threw water, flour bombs and eggs at soldiers.

The war games are based on three premises. The first is a "humanitarian crisis" in which a minority group has been cut off from clean water, food and health supplies. Tourists are deemed to be trapped in the area and requiring evacuation. The International Red Cross, Tearfund and Oxfam, among other "humanitarian groups," are helping imagined displaced people, struggling with food shortages and accommodation.

Next, a rebel militia starts causing "problems" by harassing a rival ethnic group. Finally, multi-national forces are deployed by air and sea to quell civil unrest.

Dransfield said the exercise was "as close as it gets to

the real thing” and “covers the spectrum of what we might be called to do anywhere in the world, and especially in the southwest Pacific.”

While painted in “humanitarian” colours, the precedent for the current exercise was the 2003 Australian-led neo-colonial intervention in Solomon Islands, in which New Zealand defence force and police personnel participated. It was the means of taking direct control over the Solomons, motivated by Canberra’s and Wellington’s need to reassert domination in what these imperialist powers regard as their sphere of influence.

In another radio interview on November 5, Paul Buchanan singled out Fiji as of particular concern to the New Zealand ruling elite. He noted that China had supplanted Australia and New Zealand as Fiji’s primary source of overseas funds. He stated that “the Chinese embassy in Suva is the largest building in Fiji” and serves as an “electronic eavesdropping station” in the Pacific. The Chinese navy has made recent visits to Fiji.

In what will be taken in Wellington as a further danger sign, Tongan Prime Minister Akilisi Pohiva indicated last month that he intends pushing for Tonga to join the Fiji-led Pacific Islands Development Forum, from which the two local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, are excluded.

Underlining the restoration of New Zealand’s defence ties with the US, the NZ Navy has invited the US to join its 75th birthday celebrations next year, a move that would end the 30-year freeze on US military ship visits. New Zealand’s nuclear-free policy, enacted in 1985, bans nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed ships from entering its ports. As a result, New Zealand was suspended from membership of the three-power ANZUS alliance with the US and Australia.

While the entire political establishment supports the military and intelligence alliance with the US, the government has sought to avoid alienating China, New Zealand’s second most important trading partner. However, the government’s balancing act has become increasingly difficult to sustain. In September, the cabinet blocked a \$NZ88 million bid from a subsidiary of Chinese company Shanghai Pengxin to purchase the Lochinver Station, one of the country’s biggest farms.

The main opposition parties, Labour, the Greens, and New Zealand First, have pushed for a more open

alignment with the US against China. The 1999-2008 Labour government restored ties with the US by sending troops to assist the illegal occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The opposition parties have whipped up a xenophobic campaign against “foreigners”—principally Chinese—purchasing houses and land in New Zealand, scapegoating them for ballooning property prices.

During a visit to Beijing last month, Labour leader Andrew Little said he raised the “possibility of increasing restrictions” on land sales to foreigners with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao. In fact Labour’s policy is to ban foreign homebuyers altogether.

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



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