New Zealand Defence White Paper prepares for war

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The New Zealand government's Defence White Paper, released on June 8, announced an extraordinary $20 billion over the next 15 years to replace and upgrade military hardware.

The new spending, supported by the entire political establishment, comes at a time of deepening social crisis caused by nearly a decade of austerity. Approximately 1 in 100 people are homeless due to a severe lack of affordable housing. Tens of thousands are being denied surgical procedures because of healthcare cuts. Now billions more will be taken from essential services to fund the military.

The White Paper marks a further step in the country's integration into US war plans against China, which has proceeded behind the backs of the population and in defiance of widespread anti-war sentiment.

New Zealand's ruling elite is responding to the global economic crisis by strengthening its alliance with Washington, on which it relies to support New Zealand's own neo-colonial interests. Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee stated that planned upgrades to frigates, planes and land vehicles would make NZ forces "interoperable ... with our close partners," particularly the US and Australia.

There is funding for new surveillance planes and drones to patrol well beyond NZ's Exclusive Economic Zone, throughout the South Pacific, Asia and Antarctic waters. A navy vessel will be ice-strengthened to carry out patrols in a vast area of the Southern Ocean, which is rich in natural resources, where New Zealand asserts a "right of sovereignty."

The Hercules and Boeing 757 planes will be replaced with new transportation aircraft for the rapid deployment of ground forces. The government is also promising an expansion of the armed forces' capacity to carry out cyber warfare by employing more intelligence personnel.

The White Paper was prepared in close consultation with Australia, New Zealand's closest military ally. Australia's Defence White Paper, released in February, announced $194 billion worth of purchases over the next decade, the greatest expenditure since World War II.

The Australian document made clear that the massive expansion and upgrade of its forces is aimed at boosting "interoperability" with the US for war with China, which is identified as a threat to Australia's national interests.

The New Zealand White Paper is more diplomatic in its language, reflecting the New Zealand's relatively small size and its economy's heavy reliance on agricultural exports to China, its second largest trading partner. The paper describes China as a "strategic partner" and refrains from criticising its land reclamation activities and territorial claims in the South China Sea. The Obama administration has seized on the long-standing disputes over islands as a pretext for a vast military build-up and repeated provocations against China.

Wellington is trying to maintain a fraught and ultimately unsustainable balancing act: strengthening military ties with Washington without offending Beijing. Brownlee told a press conference the government did not "take sides" in the South China Sea disputes. He demanded, however, that China "desist from further reclamations in future, and further exacerbation of the situation."

The opposition Labour Party has taken a more openly anti-Chinese position. In addition to denouncing Chinese claims in the South China Sea, it has sought to whip up xenophobia by blaming Chinese people for New Zealand's housing crisis and unemployment.

The White Paper endorses Washington's strategic "rebalance" towards Asia, i.e. its military encirclement and threats against China, aimed at maintaining US hegemony in the region. This includes an "increase in the number and size of military exercises in the Pacific and more regular interaction between New Zealand's armed forces and those of the United States."

"Deepening geostrategic competition in Asia," the White Paper states, "has heightened the risk of conflict in this critical region." It adds that "the government would consider a defence contribution to a wider international response should a conflict occur."

The White Paper notes that New Zealand already "makes an important contribution to international efforts towards

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freedom of navigation," including "maritime surveillance activities in the South Pacific and South East Asia." A planned upgrade of Orion surveillance aircraft, including new submarine detection technology, will "offer a highly valued capability to international coalition operations."

Washington has used the demand for "freedom of navigation" to justify its military presence in the South China Sea, and to strengthen military ties with Japan, the Philippines, Australia and other countries against China. NZ's surveillance upgrade will be welcomed as a contribution to the Pentagon's AirSea Battle concept—its plan for a naval and air attack on the Chinese mainland, and the imposition of a naval blockade in the event of war.

Although not mentioned in the White Paper, the Government Communications Security Bureau, New Zealand's intelligence agency, also contributes to US machinations by spying on Chinese officials on behalf of the National Security Agency.

Significantly, the White Paper endorses the right-wing Abe government's revival of militarism and the "reinterpretation" of Japan's post-World War II constitution to allow troops to deploy overseas, which has been encouraged by the US as part of its anti-China "pivot."

The document lines up with US and European warmongering against Russia, declaring that Russia's "intervention in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea," challenges "the rules-based order which supports European peace and security." Wellington supported the right-wing coup in Ukraine in 2014, which removed a pro-Russian government and sparked the country's ongoing civil war.

The White Paper also notes that 100 NZ troops are currently assisting the US-led war in Iraq. The government and opposition Labour Party both support the deployment, under the fraudulent pretext of fighting Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorism.

The alliance with US imperialism is aimed at securing Washington's ongoing support for New Zealand's own predatory neo-colonial interests. Ominously, the White Paper declares "it is likely that the Defence Force will have to deploy to the [Pacific] region over the next ten years, for a response beyond humanitarian assistance and disaster relief."

Referring to the immense social crisis in Pacific island nations, it states: "A lack of employment opportunity, compounded by demographic pressures such as surging working age populations in some countries, has the potential to generate social and political unrest."

US-New Zealand military exercises have been held to prepare for an incursion into the Pacific, where Australia and New Zealand are seeking to counter Chinese and Russian influence. NZ forces are also preparing to suppress popular opposition to austerity and anti-democratic regimes.

The entire political establishment agrees with the increased military spending to prepare for war.

The Labour Party attacked the White Paper for not going far enough. Its defence spokesman Phil Goff stated: "With cuts in expenditure and capabilities in recent years, much of what the Government is intending to spend is simply catch up." He criticised an 8 percent drop in military personnel numbers since 2009.

Labour and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party have both called for a better-armed navy. NZ First also denounced the government's moves to close army training camps, and has proposed a scheme for unemployed youth to train in the army.

Green Party co-leader James Shaw told the media "we recognise that defence spending is expensive and a lot of our equipment is outdated and we want to make sure our people have the best equipment they can and that they are as safe as possible."

The 1999-2008 Labour government, supported by the Greens, strengthened military and intelligence ties with the US by sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. It also took part in the Australian-led interventions in the Solomon Islands and East Timor, and sent troops to Tonga following riots in 2006.

The Defence White Paper should be taken as a warning: workers in New Zealand and throughout the Pacific region confront the great danger of another world war involving nuclear-armed powers. This underscores the urgent need for the building of an anti-war movement based on the socialist perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International, of uniting the working class internationally to abolish the capitalist system, which is the source of war.

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