

New Zealand military to expand Pacific presence

John Braddock
8 November 2019

New Zealand's Labour-led government is preparing to expand the country's military presence across the Pacific, according to a new Defence Paper released on October 30.

The report, "Advancing Pacific Partnerships 2019," was released by Defence Minister Ron Mark, an MP in the right-wing anti-Asian NZ First Party, which occupies a pivotal position in the coalition government. NZ First leader Winston Peters is both deputy prime minister and foreign minister. Mark is a former soldier who served in the Middle East from 1985–1990 as an officer in the armed forces of the dictatorial Sultan of Oman.

The defence assessment begins by asserting that New Zealand and Pacific countries are "confronting a series of complex disrupters." It speaks of a "new urgency," about climate change, transnational crime and "geopolitical competition" that will require the military to "act in new ways and at new levels."

New Zealand and its regional ally, Australia, are intensifying moves to shore up their military and economic dominance in the southwest Pacific, in concert with Washington, in order to counter Beijing's growing influence. The Pacific is once again becoming a key geo-strategic battleground as it was in World War II.

Mark aligned the military focus with the government's efforts to reassert its interests in the Pacific after its "past neglect." But rather than "neglect," New Zealand and Australia have dominated the region for over a century as local powers, exploiting the Pacific for resources and cheap labour as well as for strategic position.

The small Pacific states are seeking to reduce their dependence on Canberra and Wellington by increasing diplomatic and economic relations with China,

including by signing up to Beijing's massive "Belt and Road" infrastructure projects. Rifts over climate change, which poses an existential threat to low-lying islands, have intensified geo-political tensions. The Pacific Islands Forum in August was marked by a dispute over the Australian government's refusal to limit coal production to cut carbon emissions.

The new paper builds on Labour's "Pacific Reset" policy, launched by Peters at Sydney's Lowy Institute in 2018, which has driven New Zealand's "re-engagement" with the region, while strengthening its alliance with Washington in the drive to confront China.

The document does not specifically identify China, but the implication is clear. It refers to "external actors, who may not always reflect our values across their activities," being at the heart of geostrategic competition.

"If external powers establish a greater regular presence, it could materially affect the Pacific and our own strategic circumstances," the paper declares. New Zealand will work with "like-minded" regional partners and "collaborate more, be prepared to deploy more... in an increasingly competitive region."

New Zealand's commitment to maintaining "the rules-based order throughout the broader Indo-Pacific region" is emphasised. This refers to the imperialist "order" established across the region after the US defeat of Japan in World War II, in which Washington sets the "rules" and enforces them with the support of its local allies, with military means if required.

The paper talks of New Zealand bolstering "people-to-people" links as a "competitive edge" to combat competition for influence in the region. Leadership training, "cultural awareness," and women's rights will be promoted in a so-called Vaka Tahi ("one boat")

Pacific Partnership model, which promotes a kind of pan-Pacific nationalism.

The deepening alarm over climate change among the Pacific nations will be exploited for military purposes. The report references the Boe Declaration, signed by the region's leaders—including NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern—at the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum, which declared climate change to be the Pacific's single greatest “security” threat.

The imperialist powers have no interest in protecting the Pacific against the ravages of climate change. Last month an international military exercise, Operation Equator 2019, was held in New Caledonia involving military commanders from across the Pacific testing responses to natural disasters. According to Radio NZ the exercise had a “military aspect,” centering on the French government's strategy to “create an axis to counter China's influence in the South Pacific.”

The defence paper has been praised by pro-imperialist academic commentators. The director of Massey University's Centre for Defence and Security Studies, Rouben Azizian, said the assessment was “helpful” because to date the Pacific Reset had been presented as “a rather vague concept.” China's influence would grow through infrastructure projects in the Pacific, and “[w]e have to counter that by offering our own capabilities and support,” he declared.

David Capie, head of Victoria University's Centre for Strategic Studies said the paper provided a way to spread New Zealand's influence. “New Zealand can't try and outspend competitors in the region so Defence is looking for a different edge, putting a lot of emphasis on soft skills: trading on what it calls cultural intelligence, leadership training, promoting gender equality,” he said.

There is, however, nothing “soft” about the government's strategy. The paper explicitly builds upon the Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018, which for the first time targeted China and Russia as the principal “threats” to the “international community.” It echoed the US Trump administration's National Defence Strategy which demanded stepped-up preparations for looming inter-imperialist conflicts.

The 2018 document further claimed that widespread scepticism and hostility to the “international order” and “economic openness” are changing “governance for the worse.” Behind warnings about “global agents of

disorder,” and “disregard [for] the rules and norms of the system,” the message is that the country's armed forces must prepare to suppress popular opposition to war, poverty and inequality.

The new report thus calls for upgraded security “architecture,” such as links with Pacific security organisations and international agencies, including Interpol as well as local networks and involving the Pacific Police Training Advisory Group and the Australian Pacific Maritime Security Programme. The Defence Force's joint activities with Pacific countries in areas such as maritime patrols will be maintained.

What this all means can be seen in the biennial Southern Katipo military exercises held in NZ's South Island. These involve more than 2,000 New Zealand and allied military personnel in rehearsals for an armed incursion into the South Pacific to quell civil unrest and impose military order.

Labour's 2019 Budget confirmed the government will proceed with a \$NZ20 billion military expansion upgrade, beginning with a \$2 billion purchase of new anti-submarine aircraft. The defence document highlights the growth of the military by 1,500 service personnel, with an increase in the size of the Army to 6,000. A dedicated Southern Ocean Patrol Vessel will enable the navy to better “focus on the South Pacific and the changing requirements of New Zealand's expansive maritime domain.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact