

# New Zealand maritime security strategy targets China

**John Braddock****28 June 2021**

New Zealand's maritime security is facing a host of "rising threats," according to a strategy paper recently released by the Labour-Green Party government.

The 40-page document, "Maritime Security Strategy—Guardianship of Aotearoa New Zealand's Maritime Waters," was officially launched on June 17 at a conference hosted by the Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) Centre for Strategic Studies, following its publication in December by the Ministry of Transport.

The strategy requires the country's maritime security systems to "step up" in line with the government's major Strategic Defence Policy Statement, published in 2018. That paper lined up with US preparations for war, singling out China and Russia for the first time as the principal "threats" to the "international community."

The new security document voices alarm over "pressures" in the South Pacific and Southern Oceans, and says New Zealand's maritime security is "increasingly stressed" by geopolitical tensions, transnational crime, illegal fishing, and rising seas. Among the alleged risks are a weakening of the "law of the sea," threats to global supply chains, and escalating migration due to climate change.

The strategy stresses the need to reduce and prevent "malicious and negligent actors" using the maritime environment to "undermine national security interests and objectives." This is really about defending New Zealand's interests as a minor imperialist power in the Pacific region. New Zealand exercises colonial or semi-colonial influence over several island states, including Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Niue, Tuvalu and Kiribati. Wellington increasingly views China's economic influence as a threat to its own interests.

Thus the document states that a "proliferation of

actors" in the Pacific could impact New Zealand's role as a "partner of choice" within the region. "Some actors may support or complement our interests, while others may undermine them," it warns. The paper builds on the government's "Pacific Reset" policy, launched in 2018 to drive New Zealand's "re-engagement" with the region and push back against China, while strengthening the military alliance with Washington.

While not naming China, the Maritime Security Strategy cites the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and refers to unspecified efforts "to frustrate the current norms and behaviours" that in turn threaten the "integrity" of the maritime "rules-based order." This echoes the US denunciations of China's actions in the South China and East China Seas, which have served as the pretext for war preparations by Washington and its allies.

In fact, the major threat to global order is US imperialism, which established the post-World War II "order," in which it sets the rules, to ensure its unchallenged hegemony. Washington now asserts its "right" to stage provocative military exercises and so-called "freedom of navigation" operations near China and Taiwan. Australia and New Zealand have fallen into line as a quid-pro-quo for having a free hand to pursue their own imperialist interests across the Pacific.

The document makes clear that New Zealand sees its interests as far-reaching. Maritime territorial coverage extends beyond the country's immediate borders to include the "defence and security" of Tokelau, the Cook Islands and Niue, as well as the shipping routes across the Tasman Sea separating New Zealand and Australia. It claims "deep and sustained" interests across 30 million square kilometres of the Pacific and the Southern Ocean towards Antarctica.

Massey University “Pacific security” specialist Anna Powles told the VUW conference the strategy’s talk of “state actors,” which could undermine New Zealand’s interests, was a “signalling statement” about China’s role in the Pacific. “Chinese interests in the Pacific very much include maritime interests,” she declared, pointing to an increase in Chinese naval visits since 2006. The Chinese Pacific fishing fleet had also grown by more than 500 percent since 2012.

The Maritime Security Strategy proposes to utilise “diplomatic, military, economic, intelligence and law enforcement components” to achieve its objectives. “Deterrence” has a big part to play, it declares, “by convincing potential threat actors that the costs of conducting actions that impact on New Zealand’s maritime security interest outweigh benefits.”

In practical terms, this means doing away with what the document calls “fragmented” and “ad-hoc arrangements,” and bringing together the full range of maritime agencies, under a lead organisation with a “security,” i.e. military/defence focus, with increased funding and technology. The areas itemised are defence, intelligence, fisheries, border protection, biosecurity, search and rescue and organised crime.

VUW strategic studies professor Robert Ayson observed that the “deterrence” objective would require alliances, given New Zealand’s limited military means. “How in particular does New Zealand deter unwanted state-based adversaries? ... This actually means a heavy reliance on international partners,” Ayson said, clearly referencing the US and Australia.

The Ardern government is already diverting billions of dollars from essential social services such as health, housing and education to modernise and expand the military for future US-led wars. A \$NZ20 billion upgrade of the defence force involves the purchase of new P8 Poseidon and Super Hercules aircraft, specifically designed for “interoperability” with US forces. Ardern meanwhile has encouraged Washington’s aggressive positioning across the Pacific, including expanded operations by the US Coast Guard in the region.

Both Australia and New Zealand have boosted their military presence alongside smaller Pacific “partners.” Last November, Australia and Fiji announced a new Status of Forces Agreement, to facilitate joint defence exchanges and deployments. This followed Ardern’s

own visit to Fiji in February, only the second by a NZ leader since 2006, which bolstered joint military training connections.

Following a bilateral leaders’ meeting last month, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he and Ardern were “in lockstep” in seeking a “free and open Indo-Pacific, a peaceful Indo-Pacific,” echoing US statements against China in the contested region.

The leaders’ joint statement was intended to assuage fears in Canberra that New Zealand was backsliding on its responsibilities to the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network. The Ardern government has been reluctant to openly denounce Beijing, as Australia has done, because of New Zealand’s economic reliance on trade with China.

Nevertheless, the release of the maritime strategic document underscores the increasingly bellicose anti-China orientation within New Zealand’s political establishment.



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