

New Zealand Defence Assessment calls for more aggressive anti-China stance

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New Zealand's Defence Ministry released a new Defence Assessment on December 8, its first since 2014, titled, in Maori and English, "He Moana Pukepuke e Ekengia e te Waka: A Rough Sea Can Still Be Navigated." The report identifies "China's rise" and its power struggle with the United States as the major "security" risk in the Indo-Pacific.

The 36-page report identifies two principal challenges to New Zealand's defence interests: "strategic competition" and the impact of climate change. Both are deemed to be increasing. "Unchecked, they pose a threat to New Zealand's sovereignty and other key national security interests," the document contends.

The assessment warns that the prospect of a major armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific is "less remote than it has been." Defence Secretary Andrew Bridgman writes that despite the "ominous signs" outlined in the document, "we must never 'will' the worst to happen." Yet, what it portends is a possible global conflagration between nuclear-armed powers.

The document calls for a far more aggressive strategic stance. Defence policy should shift, it asserts, from a "predominantly reactive risk management-centred approach" to a more "deliberate and proactive strategy."

The meaning was spelled out by pro-US New Zealand academic Anne-Marie Brady in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on December 13. Noting that in Australia there is a perception that Wellington has been "too timid" in its approach to China, she declares: "This new assessment should put an end to that; it will really poke the panda."

The document explicitly references Australia's 2020 Strategic Update that described the US alliance as its "strategic bedrock," and signalled billions of dollars in spending on advanced military capabilities.

According to the *New Zealand Herald*, Defence Minister Peeni Henare and his Australian counterpart Peter Dutton are "quietly building defence relations,."

This includes discussing how Wellington might benefit from the recently concluded AUKUS (Aust/UK/US) pact, which involves Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.

The NZ assessment expands on the 2018 Labour government's Strategic Defence Policy Statement which targeted China and Russia as the world's major threats. China, the new report says, "is seeking to reshape the international system to make it more compatible with China's governance model and national values and with China recognised as a global leader."

The report claims China's navy is already the world's largest blue-water force, giving it "expeditionary capability" to project force well beyond its defensive needs. If any state that does "not share New Zealand's values and security interests"—i.e. China—sets up a military base or dual-use facility in the Pacific, it would be among "the most serious security threats facing New Zealand."

The publication brings "strategic competition" into New Zealand's immediate region. Events similar to those occurring in the South China Sea, it says, could take place in the South Pacific, creating "greater chances for military confrontation, by both accident and design, and particularly at sea." In response, Defence demands "the freedom to act in support of shared interests and values."

This means intervening wherever Chinese influence is deemed a threat to New Zealand's interests as a minor imperialist power, or to its allies' interests. Since WWII, successive governments have relied on support from the US and Australia to maintain New Zealand's neo-colonial hegemony over Samoa, Niue, Nauru, the Cook Islands, Tonga and other island nations, and its interests in the Antarctic region. For this reason, NZ has joined US-led wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Labour-Green Party government recently ordered police and soldiers to join an Australian-led intervention

in the Solomon Islands following a failed coup attempt by pro-US factions against the government, which is regarded as too close to Beijing.

The document turns reality on its head with unsubstantiated allegations, blanket assertions and US State Department lies. Washington, a “critical defence partner,” is benignly claimed to share New Zealand’s “concerns about addressing strategic competition in the Pacific.” In fact, US imperialism, with its decades-long history of bloody aggression, is preparing for further wars, signalled last week by Congress’s approval of a massive \$US770 billion military budget.

The assessment has nothing to say about Washington’s provocative naval operations adjacent to the Chinese mainland, the presence of huge US military bases on Guam, Okinawa and elsewhere and efforts to turn Taiwan into a flashpoint for conflict with Beijing. It supports the AUKUS pact and the Quad (the quasi-alliance of Australia, US, India, Japan) as examples of “collective action” based on the “consistent and reliable” US engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Russia, too, is accused of “undermining the international rules-based system”—the post-World War II rules established by Washington to enforce its global hegemony. It cites a litany of purported breaches by the Kremlin, presenting NATO and US propaganda as fact, including “cyber breaches,” “support for authoritarian regimes,” “undermining democratic processes in other states,” and using military force in Georgia and Ukraine. Russia, it declares, presents “an acute and ongoing threat” to the security of Europe.

One section refers darkly to strategic competition in the so-called “grey zone,” including propaganda, sabotage, clandestine military actions and foreign interference. Such activities can extend into “space, cyber-space and the high seas.” Involvement in the Five Eyes spy network, alongside the US, Australia, Canada and the UK, is endorsed as giving access to “defence capabilities, information technologies and military developments that would otherwise be unachievable.”

Despite identifying climate change as one of the region’s major challenges, the assessment only briefly addresses the implications. In the Pacific, it concedes, the direct impact of climate change will be sufficiently serious, in scope and/or scale, “to threaten the overall security or viability of countries.” The report, however, has nothing to say about the implications of this existential threat to Pacific peoples, and the dangers of weather extremes, rising sea levels, and widespread

hunger.

The Labour Party-led government, with the Greens playing an important role, has exploited climate change as a pretext to argue for purchasing more advanced naval and air force assets, and greater surveillance of the Pacific.

Nor does the report discuss the central political issue that has plagued successive governments; that of balancing the economic importance of ties with its main trading partner, China, versus the strategic-military demands of the US and Australia. It only mentions in passing that “many states are finding their space to navigate a middle path to be narrowing.” By targeting China as the prime military threat, Defence is clearly seeking to tilt decisively towards Washington.

The report is not forthcoming, at least publicly, with concrete recommendations. Changing to a more “pro-active strategy,” it warns, will require more explicit policy objectives including “deliberate and rigorous prioritisation of effort, and some hard choices and trade-offs.”

Inevitably, Defence claims it will need more expensive high-end military hardware. “As military inflation and technological change gather pace,” it declares, “New Zealand will need to “maintain military capabilities that are effective, interoperable with key security partners, and can provide credible contributions to collective security operations.”

The Labour-Green Party government is already well down that path. To fund New Zealand’s growing integration into US war preparations, last year’s budget provided a massive boost to the Defence Force. An extra \$NZ676.5 million was allocated for “readiness and frontline capability,” alongside \$898 million towards replacing the ageing Hercules fleet with new transport aircraft. This followed a record \$4.3 billion in operating and capital funding to the military across the past three budgets.



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