

New Zealand Defence Policy Review targets China

Tom Peters
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Last Friday the Labour-led government in New Zealand released two policy documents from its ongoing Defence Policy Review—the Future Force Design Principles and a Defence Policy Strategy Statement—as well as a new National Security Strategy. Taken together, these signal a significant strengthening of New Zealand’s alignment with the US-led military and intelligence build-up to war against China.

At a press conference to launch the documents, Defence Minister Andrew Little was asked: “Are you mentally preparing Kiwis for a war in our region?” He confirmed that this was the case, saying: “No one wants conflict... but while there are threats of conflict we have to be prepared for that as well.”

He said the policy review was aimed at strengthening New Zealand’s military alliance with Australia and ties with “our longstanding Five Eyes intelligence partners,” the United States, Canada, UK and Australia. Minister Little made the usual meaningless references to the military’s supposed role in humanitarian and disaster relief, but he stressed that future investment was primarily needed to have “a combat capable, ready force that protects New Zealand and our interests.”

Spelling out what this means, Little said: “If for example conflict does break out in the South China Sea, where \$20 billion of our exports flows through every year, we have a stake in that, and we may be called on to play a role should conflict break out. We need to be equipped for that and prepared for it.”

In other words, the focus of military spending is not about defending New Zealand’s territory, which has never been subject to a foreign military attack. Rather, the armed forces must be “equipped and prepared” because they will be “called on” to fight nearly 9,000 kilometres away in a war between the US and China, two nuclear-armed powers.

The release of the New Zealand strategic documents follows intensified US efforts to provoke a conflict with China, which Washington views as the main obstacle to its imperialist hegemony. Late last month, in the face of strenuous objections by Beijing, the Biden administration

announced it will provide \$345 million in weapons to Taiwan as the first tranche of an annual \$1 billion in military equipment.

The Japanese government, meanwhile, released a defence white paper describing China as the “greatest strategic challenge” and calling for a massive military build-up and closer alliance with the US. Australia has been fully integrated into US war plans, including through the AUKUS military pact, with basing arrangements for US troops, warplanes and warships, and a deal to supply Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines.

The US and Australia have pressured New Zealand to drop its pretence of not taking sides, maintained by successive governments nervous about antagonising China, which takes roughly 30 percent of all New Zealand exports.

As a minor imperialist power in the Pacific, New Zealand’s ruling class has, since World War II, depended on a close alliance with the US to defend its own neo-colonial interests in the region and more broadly. Successive Labour and National Party governments have sent troops to the illegal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have killed over a million people. At present, New Zealand soldiers are in Britain helping to train Ukrainian conscripts, who are being used as cannon fodder in the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

The Defence Policy Strategy Statement marks a definite shift. In belligerent language, it portrays China as “the major driver for the new era of strategic competition among states.”

The document declares: “Beijing continues to invest heavily in growing and modernising its military, and is increasingly able to project military and paramilitary force beyond its immediate region, including across the wider Indo-Pacific.” It denounces Beijing for seeking “to grow its political, economic, and security influence in the Pacific at the expense of more traditional partners such as New Zealand and Australia.”

The statement continues: “Activities that would be of significant concern include: the establishment of a persistent

military presence by a state that does not share New Zealand's Pacific security interests and values; military or para-military-backed resource exploitation (particularly fisheries); or even military confrontation or conflict."

All of this is profoundly hypocritical and misleading. Unlike the United States, China has no military bases in the Pacific. This has not stopped Washington, Canberra and Wellington from whipping up hysteria over the prospect of deepening "security" arrangements between Beijing and the Solomon Islands and other small Pacific states.

New Zealand's defence strategy calls for ramping up its military presence in the Pacific. The country already has close ties with the armed forces of Tonga, Samoa and other countries, including regular joint military exercises and exchanges of personnel.

In addition to strengthening military and intelligence "interoperability" with the other Five Eyes countries (US, Australia, UK and Canada), the strategy calls for stronger ties with "Singapore, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, and Japan, in particular, as well as India, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia" as well as "NATO and the European Union."

The document states that joining Pillar Two of the AUKUS agreement "may present an opportunity for New Zealand to cooperate with close security partners on emerging technologies."

Minister Little made clear that there will be a further increase in military spending, currently about 1.4 percent of GDP. This is below Australia and other US allies, which spend 2 percent or more. He did not give any specifics, but indicated that there would be more upgrades to the navy and a stepped-up recruitment drive, aimed at countering recent attrition.

Spending on the armed forces is at the direct expense of vital services such as health and education, which are facing a worsening crisis of understaffing and lack of resources.

In the face of soaring living costs and social inequality, the government is increasingly concerned about rising anti-capitalist and deeply entrenched anti-war sentiments in New Zealand. The new National Security Strategy document—prepared in consultation with pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady, among others—warns of "growing feelings of distrust and disenfranchisement, rooted in rising economic inequality and discontent." It asserts that these trends are exacerbated by "disinformation and foreign interference" from Russia and China.

In fact, any opposition to US imperialism is now denounced as disinformation. The state and corporate media have, over the past several weeks, engaged in a campaign attacking Radio NZ journalist Michael Hall for spreading "Russian propaganda" because he pointed to the real origins

of the Ukraine war in the US-backed 2014 coup. Hall also highlighted the presence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine's military. The references have since been scrubbed by Radio NZ from its online articles.

There are divisions in New Zealand's political establishment over the open and unambiguous alignment with Washington. Former Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark wrote on Twitter that the new Defence documents "suggest that NZ is abandoning its capacity to think for itself & instead is cutting & pasting from 5 Eyes' partners." She criticised the suggestion that New Zealand could join AUKUS.

Clark's government signed a free trade agreement with China in 2008. Like her successor, National Party prime minister John Key, she represents a faction that strengthened business ties with China, while at the same time boosting New Zealand's US ties and supporting imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This balancing act has become untenable for the ruling elite, with the position of Key and Clark finding no echo in the leadership of Labour or National.

Labour's ally, the Green Party, sought to verbally distance itself from the new policy statements. MP Golriz Ghahraman told the *New Zealand Herald*: "It's a very outdated response in the modern context, to think that falling into old defence allegiances and a defence prism to look at global affairs is still valid."

This is completely hollow and hypocritical; the Greens have fully supported Labour's repeated increases in military spending, along with its contribution to the US-NATO war in Ukraine.

As New Zealand approaches an election on October 14, it is clear that which ever party leads the next government will continue to deepen the country's alignment with US imperialism.

The rush towards a catastrophic Third World War can only be halted through the political intervention of the working class in an international mass anti-war movement. Such a movement must urgently be built, guided by a socialist perspective aimed at abolishing the source of war: the capitalist system itself.



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