

New Zealand to nearly double military spending

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's National Party-led government released a multi-billion dollar Defence Capability Plan last week, which will nearly double the country's military spending from just over 1 percent to 2 percent of gross domestic product in 8 years.

The \$NZ12 billion committed over the next four years, including \$NZ9 billion not previously announced, represents a dramatic increase. Annual Defence Force funding has already risen significantly in recent years from roughly \$4 billion allocated in 2020/2021 to \$5 billion in last year's budget.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon made clear that even more money will be made available, telling the media the \$12 billion figure "is the floor, not the ceiling, of funding for our defence force."

The new plan, which is supported by the opposition Labour Party, is intended to strengthen New Zealand's integration into the US-led imperialist alliance, which is rapidly preparing for war against China. NZ troops are already stationed in Britain training Ukrainians to fight in the US-NATO war against Russia; and in the Middle East, assisting in the criminal US-led bombing of Yemen.

The spending announcement came just days after President Trump imposed tariffs on all US imports, which represents a huge escalation in the US trade war whose main target is China. Washington aims to reshore manufacturing and secure supplies of raw materials in order to build up its national war industry. At the same time, it is demanding that all allies, including New Zealand, boost their contribution to the militarisation of the world.

While Luxon told a media conference that New Zealand's military spend-up was "not targeted at any particular country," this is transparently false. He was contradicted by Defence Minister Judith Collins, who cited China's testing of a ballistic missile in the Pacific last September, and the recent exercise held by Chinese navy vessels in the Tasman Sea, as reasons why New Zealand had to re-arm.

"This reality requires us not only to work with others who share our values and interests to reduce the possibility of

conflict but also to prepare ourselves should the worst happen," Collins said.

The entire political establishment and corporate media, like their counterparts in Australia, have been stoking anti-Chinese hysteria for years. In particular, China's economic agreements with impoverished Pacific island nations, such as the Solomon Islands and the Cook Islands (a semi-colony of NZ), have been portrayed as a potential military "threat," and have been seized upon to justify the militarisation of the Pacific.

The Defence Capability Plan states: "China's assertive pursuit of its strategic objectives is the principal driver for strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, and it continues to use all of its tools of statecraft in ways that can challenge both international norms of behaviour and the security of other states. Of particular concern is the rapid and non-transparent growth of China's military capability."

This turns reality on its head. China has no overseas military bases in the Pacific. It is the United States which, under successive administrations, has shifted the bulk of its navy into the region to encircle and threaten China, while strengthening military ties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, NZ and elsewhere. New Zealand has participated in numerous naval exercises in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, which are intended to provoke Beijing.

All the talk about upholding "international norms of behaviour" and reducing "the possibility of conflict" is both fraudulent and hypocritical. The Luxon government is supporting the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza; it has not criticised Trump's plans to ethnically cleanse and annex the territory, or his threats to annex Greenland and the Panama Canal.

New Zealand is a minor imperialist power which has operated in an alliance with the US since the end of World War II. The Defence Capability Plan says the government "will ensure New Zealand is materially contributing to our security partnerships, particularly to our alliance with Australia," as well as the US-led Five Eyes—the intelligence-

sharing alliance that also includes Canada, the UK and Australia. New Zealand's Waihopai spy base is a significant contributor to US surveillance operations in the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere.

The aim is to build the military into what Luxon has described as a "force multiplier" for the US and Australia. The Capability Plan says the Defence Force must "be increasingly combat capable [and] interoperable with our partners."

The plan calls for "enhanced strike capabilities," including arming the navy's existing frigates and P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft with missiles, and upgrading the anti-tank missiles for infantry and special forces. It also outlines plans for new navy helicopters and army vehicles, and for acquiring a fleet of maritime and aerial drones, both for surveillance and combat purposes.

The document makes clear that the military must be capable of deploying around the world, and policing much of the Pacific and Southern Oceans. A map with the caption "New Zealand's territory" shows a vast area claimed by the country's ruling elite, including the exclusive economic zones of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau—New Zealand's colonial possessions in the Pacific.

In addition to fear-mongering about China, the document states: "Civil disorder has also demonstrated the potential for instability in the Pacific." The New Zealand and Australian militaries are preparing to intervene throughout the region to suppress opposition to poverty and social inequality—such as the riots that erupted last year in New Caledonia, which prompted France to deploy thousands of paramilitary forces to the territory to restore "order."

The government is also taking steps to boost recruitment into the armed forces, following several years of high attrition rates. Last year the Defence Force lowered the academic requirements for young people to enlist. "To apply to train as an Army combat specialist, auto-technician and plumber, a Navy diver and logistic specialist, and an Air Force firefighter—among other roles—now requires three years of high school," and no longer requires the applicant to achieve a passing grade, according to Radio NZ.

The Defence Force already runs special training programs, called Service Academies, in 29 schools across the country. The aim is to recruit working class youth, who are finding it impossible to get stable, well-paid jobs, to fight and die for imperialism.

The plan to double New Zealand's military budget will be paid for with intensified austerity measures. Already, the government has frozen wages across the public sector and sacked thousands of workers. The healthcare and education systems are being starved of funds and hospitals are in crisis.

Last year's budget announced \$5.72 billion in new

spending on health over a four-year period—far less than what is required to keep up with inflation and population growth, and less than half the \$12 billion announced for the military.

The Labour Party fully supports the militarisation of society. Labour leader Chris Hipkins told RNZ that the Defence Capability Plan builds upon plans made by the previous Labour-led government. The 2017–2023 Ardern government significantly strengthened ties with US imperialism, made major purchases of military equipment, and expanded the country's intelligence agencies.

In August 2023, Labour's Defence Minister Andrew Little made clear that the target was China, saying: "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."

The union bureaucracy, like its counterparts in the US, also voiced support for the military spending plan. The Public Service Association, New Zealand's largest union, which has enforced thousands of redundancies across several government departments, issued a statement urging the government to reverse cuts previously announced to civilian Defence Force jobs "if it is serious about boosting the capability of the military."

Union leader Fleur Fitzsimons complained that Luxon was refusing to recognise "the critical role the NZDF civilian workforce plays in ensuring our military is combat ready."

There is widespread, deeply ingrained popular hostility to militarism and war, as shown in the global protests against the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza. Appeals to the imperialist governments, however, have failed to stop the genocide.

What is urgently required—in New Zealand and internationally—is the development of a socialist anti-war movement, which links the fight against war with the fight against austerity and the profit system itself. This means mobilising the working class in opposition to the entire capitalist political establishment, including Labour, and the union apparatus.

This is the program fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand.



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