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Coming Back to the US Fold: New Zealand Defence and Security Policies

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

The recent Defence White Paper and the signing by the United States and New Zealand of the Wellington Declaration are significant developments in New Zealand's defence and security policies.

Commentary

TWO RECENT developments indicate major changes in the defence and security policies of New Zealand. The first was the release in Wellington of a new Defence White Paper – the first review of the national defence posture for about 13 years. The second was the signing by the United States and New Zealand of the Wellington Declaration. This provides for a new strategic partnership between the two countries and formally ends their strategic stand-off of the last 25 years.

Taken together, these developments show fresh commitments in Wellington to a regional security role and to the bilateral relationship with the US. They provide clear recognition of the importance of the US in the region, and of a renewed desire for New Zealand to be an active player in regional security.

Strategic Environment

While the new White Paper talks of increased strategic uncertainty, New Zealand's strategic environment is relatively benign. New Zealand is probably the most secure country in the world. It has no land borders and is insulated by Australia from possible instability or conflict in Asia. With barely one per cent of GDP spent on defence, it is one of the smallest defence spenders in the Asia-Pacific.

Although relatively small in land area and population, New Zealand has several offshore territories and a large exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as well as defence and security responsibilities for three independent or semi-independent territories – the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau. Maintaining sovereignty over the Ross Dependency in Antarctica is another important defence objective.

The relative remoteness and security of New Zealand has underpinned a strongly anti-nuclear line. This led to US suspension in the mid-1980s of its treaty obligations to New Zealand under the ANZUS Treaty. The last ten years have seen a drawdown in the offensive capabilities of the New Zealand Defence Force – particularly the

disbandment of the fighter attack capability.

Anti-Nuclear Attitudes

Anti-nuclear attitudes are deeply engrained in the political culture of New Zealand. This is a consequence of community opposition to French nuclear tests in the Pacific, the 1985 bombing by French secret service agents of the Greenpeace protest vessel *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland, and the almost coincident refusal of the U.S. to “neither confirm nor deny” whether a visiting American warship was carrying nuclear weapons.

The New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act passed in 1987. This prohibited nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered ships from entering NZ ports or waters. Recent years have seen gradual warming of the relationship between New Zealand and the US, including NZ participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the conflict in Afghanistan. The situation was helped by a conservative national government coming into power in Wellington in 2008 more committed to a close relationship with the US. Also, with fewer nuclear weapons at sea, the US policy of “neither confirm nor deny” does not have the same influence on bilateral relations as it had previously.

2010 White Paper

With no conceivable direct military threat to New Zealand, the 2010 Defence White Paper focuses on dealing with the risks of political instability, natural disasters and humanitarian crises in the South Pacific. It gives relatively little attention to Southeast Asia with Indonesia, for example, not being mentioned at all by name.

The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) are identified as the country’s most enduring security relationship in Southeast Asia and a “valuable anchor” for its military presence in the region. This is more enthusiastic than Australia’s 2009 Defence White Paper, which only saw the FPDA as “a useful mechanism”.

Several capability priorities are evident in the White Paper. The first is the ability to meet security challenges in the country’s maritime zones and the South Pacific. These are the “starting point” for selecting military capabilities, underpinning the importance of patrol vessels and maritime surveillance aircraft in the NZ defence inventory.

The second priority is the ability to make a realistic contribution to collective action under the FPDA, the Pacific Islands Forum, or as part of an ad hoc international coalition. This capability is provided by highly deployable ground forces and the two ANZAC-Class frigates. The last priority is the strategic projection and logistic capability to support military deployments in the South Pacific or elsewhere. This is provided by transport aircraft and a military sealift capability.

Wellington Declaration

The Wellington Declaration means that New Zealand has come back to the US fold. It provides the political framework for the two countries. to work more closely together on practical projects in the Pacific, including renewable energy, and natural disaster response. The focus is on non-traditional security threats and no mutual security obligations are implied. However, non-proliferation and disarmament are likely to remain key New Zealand concerns.

While there is renewed recognition in Wellington of the importance of a close relationship with Washington, the resurrection of an ANZUS-style relationship is unlikely. NZ Prime Minister Key has said his country will continue to run an independent foreign policy.

A closer strategic partnership with New Zealand is part of the current US programme of building up the list of close American allies in the Asia-Pacific and demonstrating its commitment to the region. While the South Pacific is seen as a strategic back-water, there has been growing concern in Washington about China increasing its influence among the small Pacific island countries. From a US perspective, New Zealand, as a “big fish” in the relatively small South Pacific strategic “pond”, has a key role in managing Chinese inroads into this region.

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