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The New Zealand Defence White Paper: a more strategically-extroverted Kiwi?

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The latest New Zealand Defence White Paper—prosaically titled *Defence White Paper 2010*—was released on 2 November. Like all such White Papers, it signals New Zealand declaratory policy to audiences at home and abroad. And, like all White Papers, it has been an instrument for engaging top-level policymakers inside New Zealand in thinking about the country's future defence needs.

Typically, defence issues don't have a big constituency in New Zealand. Issues of strategy and hardware are normally the preserve of only a small fraction of the political elite. That's because mainstream views of defence were locked-in some decades ago, with the passage of the anti-nuclear legislation, the subsequent contraction of New Zealand's strategic horizon, and the placing of the US–New Zealand bilateral upon a 'friendly' rather than an 'allied' footing. But this document suggests New Zealand is looking for a way to get back to closer relationships with its traditional partners, especially the US and Australia.

A shift of horizon?

The latest Defence White Paper doesn't undo any of those big totemic settings of New Zealand defence policy—it doesn't try to reverse the anti-nuclear policy, for example, nor to revive ANZUS. But it does seem to offer a shift in relation to strategic horizon, holding out the prospect of greater New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) engagement in ad-hoc coalitions operating in theatres distant from New Zealand's shores. By Australian standards, the allusions to such potential engagement are thin. And they are surrounded by caveats in relation to force size and interests. Still, what's interesting is that they are being written at all.

Clearly, John Key's National government is signaling a shift in 'tone' in New Zealand's defence policy and it has used the White Paper to do that. The shift is meant to suggest a New Zealand more engaged with allies, partners and friends. True, those terms—'allies', 'partners', and 'friends'—are nowhere defined in the document: all three terms are used to describe New Zealand's relationship with Australia, for example. And the ANZUS Treaty is not even mentioned—an indicator that points to continuing Kiwi sensitivities about that particular alliance. Repeatedly, the document talks about New Zealand's 'traditional partners' (by which it seems to mean US, Britain, Australia and

Canada) when it wants to discuss issues of broader Western concern, such as the narrowing of the technological gap between Western militaries and non-Western ones. Australia is described as New Zealand's 'most important security partner', and the United States as 'a close security partner'.

The core of New Zealand's defence policy is still shaped by geography, the priorities encompassing NZ and its associated territories (the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau), a 'fragile' South Pacific, and Australia. Beyond those immediate regional imperatives, the NZDF has missions that relate to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in Southeast Asia, UN-mandated missions, and ad-hoc coalitions that the government might choose to support from time to time. Despite its endorsement of a rules-based international order, the document accepts that 'the success of most major international military coalitions will continue to depend on US involvement'.

Geostrategic challenges

The document paints—in Chapter 3—a picture of a shifting geostrategic environment that would be familiar to most Australian strategic planners. It outlines an increasingly uncertain strategic environment out to 2035 where the US remains the dominant player but where other powers are rising, and the US technological lead is narrowing. It is grimly realistic on the prospects for proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, observing that the world 'seems poised on the edge of a new and potentially more unpredictable age of proliferation'.

The chapter canvasses New Zealand's strategic interests not only near to home but also further afield. Its tone is highly equivocal on Southeast Asia's strategic outlook, but it restates the value of FPDA as an 'anchor' there for New Zealand's interests. It canvasses a North Asia where China defines and pursues its interests 'in a more forthright way', and a South Asia that turns increasingly upon India's growing power. The section on the Middle East begins with an observation that New Zealand has strategic interests there. It notes the region will prove a persistent challenge to stability and accepts New Zealand is likely to be asked to contribute to future stability operations—whether under the UN flag or in international coalitions.

Capabilities

Overall, in its assessment of the international strategic environment, the White Paper reads as a thoughtful document. But the paper doesn't contain much in the way of new shopping lists—certainly nothing to compare with the grand force structure ambitions outlined in Australia's Defence White Paper in 2009. Still, it is interesting to see the reasoning behind the proposals to enhance the combat effectiveness, protection, sustainability and mobility of New Zealand's light infantry and the critical enabling technologies of long-range air and sea transport. The proposals are essentially defended with an explanation that 'these measures will allow the NZDF to deploy more troops on overseas operations, and for longer.'

Similarly, in his introduction to the document, the Minister for Defence, Wayne Mapp, explains that the NZDF 'must...enable New Zealand to contribute meaningfully to regional and international security with partners and friends', and justifies the investment in ANZAC frigates as intended 'to ensure they continue to add value to coalition operations'. It is such phrases that support the broader judgment outlined above: New Zealand senses geopolitical transformation is looming, and is keen to re-warm its ties to traditional partners.

The Australia–New Zealand ‘alliance’

With the return of the more strategically-extroverted Kiwi, it is a good time for Australia and New Zealand to be putting more meat on the bones of their Closer Defence Relationship (the title given to efforts in the 1990s to nurture bilateral defence cooperation despite the ANZUS difficulties). Perhaps the discussion might include, though, an exploration of the current basis of the ‘alliance’ relationship between the two countries. The White Paper states that NZ has ‘no closer ally’ than Australia (para 2.20). And it accepts as one of the tasks of the NZDF that it be able ‘to discharge [New Zealand’s] obligations as an ally of Australia’ (para 4.8). It states at one point that New Zealand would ‘consider the use of military force... in response to a direct threat to Australia’, and at another that New Zealand would ‘immediately respond to any direct attack on Australia.’

But what is the basis of the current alliance relationship? Is it still ANZUS? The White Paper doesn’t mention ANZUS. Indeed, in Chapter 4, four paragraphs under a sub-heading ‘Support our alliance with Australia’ (paras 4.13–4.16) talk about ‘the ANZAC tradition’, and the mechanism of Closer Defence Relations. True, the opening sentence in that piece of text talks about giving the ANZAC tradition ‘greater contemporary relevance’, but the tradition itself is not an alliance relationship. Moreover, the Australian Defence White Paper of 2009 is noticeably ambiguous on the status of the defence relationship between the two countries: the section on New Zealand in that document (paras 11.27–11.29) similarly talks about ‘the Anzac tradition’ rather than the alliance relationship. Perhaps both countries need to clarify their expectations of each other’s strategic commitments.

Words and deeds

If New Zealand is interested in strengthening its ties to its old partners, those countries will be wanting to see some further indications of Wellington’s earnest. One of the indicators they will be watching is defence funding. New Zealand is not a country which spends lavishly on defence. Indeed, current defence spending runs at only about 1% of GDP. Notwithstanding the more ambitious agenda outlined in the White Paper, that does not seem about to change. Rather, New Zealand will be running its own version of the Australian Strategic Reform Program, attempting to identify internal savings in the ‘middle’ and ‘back’ offices that might be redirected to achieving enhancements in front-line capabilities.

Conclusion

New Zealand’s move back towards better partnership relations with its old allies is an important strategic development, but not a critical one. New Zealand is a valuable partner around the immediate neighbourhood, but in an age of surging Asian growth, it doesn’t bring enough to the table to shift the larger power balances one way or the other. Still, the 2010 Defence White paper suggests that a long period of difficulties in New Zealand’s relations with its allies and partners might be coming to an end. The shift seems to come from two sources: within New Zealand the generation that championed the anti-nuclear push of the late 1970s and early 1980s is passing into history; and across Asia the strategic environment is becoming more complex and uncertain, increasing regional anxieties.

It would be too much to expect New Zealand’s strategic policy to change dramatically: the country will remain a small power, operating most comfortably close to home. But Wellington now seems keen to enhance its strategic relationships with both Australia and the US. Canberra and Washington will be watching to see how much of those new shadings in New Zealand’s strategic policy flow through to actions, both in the Pacific and beyond.

About the author

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