

New Zealand government plans major increase in military spending

By Tom Peters
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New Zealand's National Party government is finalising its 2016 Defence White Paper, which will outline spending and strategic priorities for the country's military. The document was initially planned for release at the end of last year but has been delayed for months.

Australia's Defence White Paper, released in February, announced a massive \$A195 billion in spending over the next decade on military acquisitions alone—new submarines, warships, jet fighters and an array of other military hardware. The purpose is to further integrate Australia into the US “pivot to Asia”—the military encirclement and preparations for war against China, which the White Paper identified as a threat to Australian interests.

New Zealand Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee told the *New Zealand Herald* his government's White Paper was being prepared in close consultation with Australia and “will similarly reflect those shared values and security perspectives, including the importance of interoperability between our defence forces.”

Like Australia, New Zealand's political establishment supports the anti-China “pivot” and views its alliance with Washington as crucial to defending its own neo-colonial interests in the South Pacific. The Obama administration is demanding military “interoperability” with Australia and New Zealand, along with other US allies throughout the region, in order to build a fully-integrated force to confront China.

While seeking to preserve cordial relations with China, New Zealand's second largest trading partner, Prime Minister John Key's government has committed to the US war drive. New Zealand's air force is part of the Bersama Shield exercise currently underway in the South China Sea involving Australia, Malaysia,

Singapore and Britain. In March, New Zealand joined exercises with the US and South Korea.

Over the past year, the US has greatly heightened tensions in the South China Sea, condemning China's land reclamation and “militarisation” of reefs and atolls under its administration. The US navy has already mounted two “freedom of navigation” operations, directly challenging China's territorial claims by sending warships within the 12-nautical-mile limit around Chinese administered islets. Washington is pressing its allies to follow suit.

To strengthen “interoperability” with the US and Australia, New Zealand has already increased military spending and will undoubtedly outline more funding in the White Paper. Earlier this year, the Defence Ministry announced plans for an extra \$11 billion worth of acquisitions over the next decade, including new air transport, surveillance aircraft and navy frigates. In February, the government announced a \$440 million upgrade of weapons systems for two frigates. Eight new helicopters also have been purchased for the navy.

Last month the Defence Force reportedly requested multi-million dollar submarine-spotting equipment for its Orion aircraft. Robert Ayson, head of the Centre for Strategic Studies in Wellington, told Radio NZ, “the South Pacific is not a heavy submarine area but New Zealand also operates further afield.” China and other Southeast Asian nations were increasing their underwater capabilities, he said. In other words, the upgrade is not for defensive purposes but to assist the aggressive operations by the US near Chinese territory.

The Pentagon is placing a premium on naval forces as its plans for war with China—AirSea Battle—envisage massive air and missile attacks on the Chinese mainland from ships and submarines in nearby waters, as well as US military bases in Asia. American and

allied forces would also be used to impose a naval blockade aimed at crippling the Chinese economy by cutting off vital imports of energy and raw materials.

A new \$46 million Battle Training Facility for the elite Special Air Service (SAS) forces will play a key role in training New Zealand troops to fight in US and Australian-led operations. Key and Brownlee attended the official opening of the facility on April 8. According to Fairfax Media, “special forces representatives from the USA and Australia, as well as other international military dignitaries” were also present.

The facility will be used for joint exercises involving US and other foreign troops, as well as by other branches of the NZ Defence Force and the police. The *New Zealand Herald* reported that it would train soldiers for environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan and “urban battlefields,” including “Auckland high rise buildings, a ship captured by pirates, hotels and shopping malls.”

Defence Force Chief Lieutenant General Tim Keating said the SAS would be trained to respond to threats that “can be from someone on your side, or some unsuspecting place.”

During their rotations in Afghanistan, as part of the US-led occupation, the NZ SAS were implicated in war crimes against prisoners and Afghan civilians. Using the threat of terrorism as a pretext, these elite troops are to be prepared for operations within New Zealand—potentially to suppress protests against the government’s deepening austerity measures and the march toward war.

The military’s spending spree comes amid ongoing attacks on working people’s living standards. In response to the economic crisis, the government has cut funding to healthcare and welfare, and is destroying thousands of jobs, including at the Inland Revenue Department, New Zealand Post and state-owned mining company Solid Energy.

Far from criticising the military spend-up, the opposition Labour Party and its ally, the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party, have attacked the government from the right, calling for even more spending and military recruitment. The last Labour government fully restored New Zealand’s alliance with the US by sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. The opposition parties have embraced New Zealand’s

alignment with the US against China and have sought to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia by scapegoating Chinese immigrants over the housing crisis and unemployment.

On April 14, NZ First defence spokesman Ron Mark released figures showing that the navy patrol vessels Pukaki and Taupo had not spent any time out of port since 2012 and 2013 respectively. He declared: “Our Navy is frankly way too small and our seas are mostly unguarded.” Mark said the navy should be equipped to patrol beyond New Zealand’s exclusive economic zone to cover “a vast slice of the globe that extends from Antarctica to north of the equator and mid-Tasman to east of the Cook Islands.”

Labour’s defence spokesman Phil Goff said the navy was “crippled by staff shortages” following a 23 percent reduction in staff in 2012. He denounced Defence Minister Brownlee for lacking “commitment to our armed forces being able to carry out the roles the country needs it to.”

NZ First spokesman Mark also lashed out at the National Party for reportedly preparing to close army training areas at Waiouru and Tekapo. He described the move as a “betrayal” and accused the government of being “short-sighted with respect to what it takes to train and prepare for war,” adding that “internationally, we live in a time of unprecedented instability.” To help “prepare for war,” NZ First recently proposed a scheme for unemployed youth as young as 15 to receive army training. The entire political establishment is committed to the militarisation of society and the integration of New Zealand into Washington’s reckless drive toward war with China.

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