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New Zealand Defence Policy Under Labour

Thomas-Durell Young

The New Zealand general election of 14 July 1984 brought to office the fourth New Zealand Labour Party (NZLP) government in the postwar era in a crushing defeat over the National Party government which had ruled the country since late 1975. While the election was essentially fought on the economic record of the National Party government,¹ the issues of New Zealand's continued participation in the Tripartite Mutual Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States (ANZUS), and the continuation of port visits by nuclear-propelled and potentially nuclear-armed warships and aircraft were very much in evidence during the campaign. Official NZLP Party policy has long held that nuclear weapons and nuclear-propelled vessels should be excluded from New Zealand territory as it is felt that the presence of such ships and weapons make New Zealand a potential target in Soviet strategic planning. Moreover, a principal tenet of the NZLP foreign policy stance is for the renegotiation of the ANZUS Treaty so as to eliminate its "nuclear" aspects as well as to work for the establishment of a nuclear-free weapons zone in the South Pacific.² Not surprisingly then, one of the first policy pronouncements of the new NZLP government led by Mr. David Lange was to declare that "nuclear" warships would not be allowed in New Zealand ports.

Although the main object of this port ban would be the U.S. Navy with its long-standing policy of neither confirming nor denying which of its vessels carry nuclear weapons, and its fleet of combatants of which approximately one-third are nuclear-propelled, the Prime Minister has maintained that this policy in no way derogates from his government's continued commitment to the ANZUS alliance.³ This seemingly contradictory statement has been explained by the New Zealand Ambassador to the United States in a statement presented to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs which held hearings in March 1985 on U.S.-New Zealand relations. The ANZUS alliance, he stated, has always been

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time, the NZDF was principally developed to operate alongside allied forces for contingencies in Southeast Asia, and before 1955, in the Middle East. Although New Zealand is the sole remaining Western power to maintain a ground force presence in Southeast Asia,³⁵ events in the South Pacific during the 1970s have required Wellington to reassess its security perceptions toward the latter region.

Besides being the last area in the world to gain independence from the colonial powers, since 1976 the numerous South Pacific island states have been the object of Soviet diplomatic overtures to establish a permanent political presence in the area. These political efforts, in addition to attempts to establish permanent fishing support facilities coupled with the increased Soviet naval presence in the Pacific in general, have led to a redefinition of the security requirements of New Zealand's immediate region. The civil bilateral development aid budget has been increased for the region and the Mutual Assistance Program which was established in 1973 to assist the island states to develop their own defence capability. While the Mutual Assistance Program budget is quite small by North Atlantic standards,³⁶ it must be recalled that the island states' defence forces are modest and New Zealand's principal assistance has been in the area of training, in addition to assisting in some development projects, such as reef clearing.

Although identified in the 1972 and 1978 "Defense Reviews,"³⁷ neither Review proposed providing the NZDF with the necessary capability to fulfill these new operational requirements. The NZDF's orientation remained focused for contingencies in the Southeast Asian theatre. The 1983 "Defense Review" recognized the deficiencies in the structure of the NZDF and recommended a series of changes in logistics, equipment and force development to provide the services with the capabilities to respond and influence events in the South Pacific.³⁸ The defence program outlined by O'Flynn basically follows the guidelines set down in the 1983 Review; the essence of which requires that New Zealand possess the military capability to independently respond to situations in its own region.³⁹ Moreover, it is interesting to note that in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' paper mentioned above, the conclusion reached was that the downgrading in the United States defence relationship did not change New Zealand's interests in the South Pacific. The ANZUS policy of "strategic denial" of the South Pacific from the Soviet Union was still considered of prime importance to New Zealand, although to continue to do so would be more expensive.⁴⁰

The aims of the NZLP government's defence policy initiatives are neither novel nor do they differ greatly in their central strategic goals of maintaining the stability of the Pacific while excluding the Soviet Union in the process. The main change from previous governments' policies is, of course, the NZLP's approach to the "nuclear" issue and the resulting impact on Wellington's security relations with the United States. Although the Labour