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Part of the Pivot? The Washington Declaration and US-NZ Relations

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Those who thought the improving US-New Zealand security relationship had already reached a new equilibrium got a surprise with the June 19th announcement of the Washington Declaration on US-NZ Defense Cooperation. Indeed, few observers were even aware that New Zealand's Defense Minister Jonathan Coleman was visiting the United States, and fewer still expected that he and US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta would be signing a major new agreement.

In the last eighteen months the bilateral US-NZ relationship had already seemed to be bounding along nicely. The "Wellington Declaration," which US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed during her visit to New Zealand in November 2010, set out a range of new ideas about security cooperation with particular reference to the South Pacific. The following year NZ military personnel and a naval vessel participated in the annual US "Pacific Partnership" humanitarian exercise in the South Pacific.

This all seemed part of a steady plan, but more recently the pace has picked up. In April this year, US Marines and army personnel took part in a major exercise in the middle of New Zealand's North Island. In turn, NZ soldiers have been training with US Marines in California. And for the first time in a generation New Zealand is involved in the large RIMPAC exercises off Hawai'i, which have a strong maritime combat focus.

Statements of policy intent suggest a similar rapid progression in ties. At the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Dr. Coleman publicly endorsed the US force posture rebalancing towards Asia which Mr. Panetta had detailed earlier in his presentation at the same event. A few days later, at an early US Independence Day celebration in Wellington—timed to mark the 70th anniversary of the arrival of US Marines in NZ during WWII—US Ambassador David Huebner told an audience which included a half dozen NZ cabinet ministers that the relationship was now as strong as it had been at any time since the 1940s.

This was quite a claim given that the obstacle to the resumption of formal alliance relations under the 1951 ANZUS Treaty—New Zealand's non-nuclear policy—was still in place, since reinforced by the fact that NZ naval vessels partaking in RIMPAC are being made to dock at a civilian port in Honolulu, not the US naval base at Pearl Harbor. But that same week, New Zealand's Foreign Minister Murray McCully, who like Dr. Coleman is a strong advocate of the US relationship, said that he agreed with the ambassador's very positive assessment.

To the extent that it is implemented, the Washington Declaration aims to take the bilateral defense partnership even further. As well as establishing and regularizing high-level defense dialogues, there is talk about extending maritime military cooperation including cooperation between both countries in developing their "deployable

Robert Ayson, Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies: New Zealand, and **David Capie**, Senior Lecturer at the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations, both at the Victoria University of Wellington, explain "that while New Zealand has not returned to a formal alliance status in an ANZUS context, it is now very clearly a *de facto* ally of the United States."



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capabilities” and in building their “maritime security presence and capabilities.” These are not words to be brushed over lightly. The maritime domain in what the United States calls the Western Pacific—as opposed to New Zealand’s South Pacific island focus—is the main cockpit of today’s geopolitical competition. If the Wellington Declaration was about security cooperation in the South Pacific, the Washington Declaration is about military cooperation that extends further north into Asia.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, Dr. Coleman argued that it was in New Zealand’s interests to “maximize” trilateral exercise opportunities with its old partners, the United States and Australia. In welcoming the Washington Declaration, it is noticeable that Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith emphasized the importance of Australia’s own close relationship with Washington. All of this suggests that while New Zealand has not returned to a formal alliance status in an ANZUS context, it is now very clearly a *de facto* ally of the United States.

But strikingly, having secured this new agreement, the relevant NZ ministers have been quick to downplay its significance. First, they have been keen to stress that this is not an alliance. Dr. Coleman informed the *Weekend Herald* that “It’s not ANZUS in drag.” Strictly speaking this is true. Under ANZUS the two countries were committed to act in accordance with their constitutional processes to meet common dangers in the event of attacks on their territory or forces in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, this new Washington Declaration does come much closer to a return to this understanding than anything seen in the last generation by stipulating that both parties “are prepared to respond in accordance with national approval processes in a timely and effective way to the range of contingencies that may arise in the region, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and multilateral cooperation with regional partners’ armed forces.”

Second, ministers have indicated that the declaration does not take the relationship into new ground but rather “ties a bow” around what is already happening. There is no doubt that the relationship was already moving closer. But this declaration does look for more: the text cites among its main purposes the provision of “a framework for cooperation to focus, strengthen, and expand the bilateral defense relationship” and the promotion of “a common vision that shapes the Participants’ intent to expand practical bilateral defense cooperation.” These read as signs of things still to come, depending in part on the resources that the two countries contribute towards implementing them.

Finally, the NZ government has also said that the declaration is consistent with maintaining an “independent” foreign policy. Strictly speaking this proposition does hold. The declaration itself refers to the “independence, self-reliance and sovereignty” of the two signatories and does nothing to wind back New Zealand’s long-standing non-nuclear policy. But an “independent” foreign policy can also be interpreted more broadly to mean a position of autonomy from great power tussles which has allowed New Zealand freedom of maneuver. We think the Washington Declaration reflects a position of clear alignment in which New Zealand appears to have traded in some of its independence chips.

New Zealand and the United States have had a mutual interest in a closer defense relationship for some time. But we wonder, from a New Zealand perspective, what this strong alignment means for the country’s overall foreign policy settings in a region in which China’s growing influence remains the main story. In *Asia Pacific Bulletin* No. 104, released just 15 months ago, we suggested that US-NZ defense relations were moving at an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary pace. However, with everything we have seen in the last few months, and especially in the wake of the Washington Declaration, we are now not so sure.