

Strategic Analysis Paper

13 March 2018

Indo-Pacific Strategic Choices for New Zealand under the Ardern Government?

Balaji Chandramohan
FDI Visiting Fellow

Key Points

- On Indo-Pacific matters, the Labour Party-led Government, headed by Jacinda Ardern, will no doubt take a lead from Canberra's maritime strategic vision, but its primary focus will continue to be on the Asia-Pacific component of the region, particularly the South Pacific.
- Wellington may acquire Boeing P-8A *Poseidon* aircraft to increase New Zealand's capability for the new underwater intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance requirements in the Indo-Pacific region. That will enable NZ to continue working closely with both the United States and Australia.
- The NZ Government will continue to maintain its strategic partnership with the United States, despite Wellington's ever-expanding trading links with Beijing.
- Deeper strategic links with India, Indonesia and France may result from a greater NZ involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

Summary

In 2017, New Zealand had a change of government for the first time in almost a decade, with the Labour Party's Jacinda Ardern becoming Prime Minister. Some changes in strategic orientation should therefore be expected, as Wellington seeks to address certain strategic issues of its own, but the general sense of [concurrence](#) with Canberra as to the overall strategic outlook in the wider Indo-Pacific region will continue.

The general framework for the Ardern Government's strategic orientation will continue to be derived from the New Zealand Defence White Paper released in 2016, but with some variations. The White Paper tried to address the complex geopolitical game that Wellington must manage in the future.

Analysis

One of the important aspects included the 2016 Defence White Paper was Wellington's explicit concurrence with Washington's "Pivot", or "Rebalance", in the Indo-Pacific which, to a large extent, was a new development and a departure from the 2010 Defence White Paper.

The White Paper of 2016 envisaged a scenario in which NZ was caught in a Cold War-type scenario between Washington and Beijing, with the latter spreading its influence from the South China Sea to the South Pacific. In such a scenario, the White Paper assessed that it would be better for New Zealand's interests to join with Washington.

Times have changed, however, since the release of the Defence White Paper 2016, with changes of government in both Washington and Wellington. We can reasonably expect, therefore, that there will be some changes in strategic orientation, particularly for the latter.

Winston Peters, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, was credited with having improved New Zealand-United States relations during his tenure as Foreign Minister in the last Helen Clark Labour-led government of 2005-08. The expectation now is that Wellington and Washington will co-operate more closely in the Asia-Pacific region (including the South Pacific), but how much co-operation there will be in the broader Indo-Pacific theatre will be worth watching. It is, for instance, not yet clear if the Ardern Government will continue to deploy Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) frigates to the western Indian Ocean under the auspices of the Combined Maritime Forces counter-piracy and security Task Forces 150 and 151.

After the anti-nuclear legislation and ANZUS rupture of 1987, New Zealand governments, particularly the Labour Party governments, had an oft-times uneasy relationship with Washington. Historically speaking, the NZ Labour Party, with a very different outlook to the conservative worldview of the US Republican Party, did not always get along well with Republican occupants of the White House.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the Wellington Declaration of 2010 and the release of the Defence White Paper 2010, changed all that. The need to re-forge the long-lost friendship with Washington as part of NZ's strategy in the Pacific became apparent. That was reinforced when a number of South Pacific Island nations demonstrated a reluctance to continue the commitment to democratic principles, which threatened NZ's interests and influence in the region.

Apart from the external strategic orientation, the Ardern Government will also be addressing internal issues related to equipment purchases, the recruitment and retention of personnel,

foreign alliance commitments and the overall thrust of NZ Defence Force (NZDF) operations, to better secure its national interests.

The 2010 and 2016 Defence White Papers and the 2014 Defence Assessment and the White Paper 2016 together set out Wellington's maritime strategy. The expectation is that the NZDF will acquire Boeing P8s, which will help it to work closely with both Australia and the United States in monitoring the vast Exclusive Economic Zones of the wider Indo-Pacific, as well as, possibly, the South China Sea.

NZ also plans to boost the undersea warfare capabilities of its P-3K2 *Orion* aircraft. The aircraft will acquire a new underwater intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability package, using an acoustic processing system. The package will be very similar to that installed on the United States Navy's P-8A *Poseidon* maritime surveillance aircraft.

The proposal to upgrade the anti-submarine warfare capability of the P-3K2s *Orion* maritime patrol aircraft was first mooted by the previous National Party-led Government. It will be particularly relevant in the context of maritime operations in South-East Asia (including those under the Five Power Defence Arrangements [FPDA]), and offer a coalition-ready [platform](#), which, if needed, could be deployed around the Indo-Pacific.

An Indo-Pacific Strategic Orientation?

Wellington's explicit support for Washington's pivot or rebalance to the Indo-Pacific is an important aspect of the 2016 White Paper, which went further than its 2010 predecessor. The policy was reflected in the White Paper's reaffirmation of the need to keep open the Sea Lanes of Communication in the Indo-Pacific.

A strategic partnership, if not an alliance by any other name, between Wellington and Washington was formalised by the bilateral Wellington Declaration (2010) and the Washington Declaration (2012). The Defence White Paper 2016 reaffirmed both the Wellington and Washington Declarations, which had been undertaken with the support of the Labour Party. The above aspects may require clear cut confirmation from the new Labour Party Government, especially to reassure its strategic and alliance partners, such as India, Australia, Indonesia and the United States.

Under Ardern, New Zealand may give less emphasis to its "Five Eyes" intelligence co-operation partners, [at least in public](#). It has, however, given very positive signals on the Trans Pacific Partnership, and would ideally like to see the United States returned to the TPP as a part of its overall foreign policy. As the US seeks to maintain its influence in the Indo-Pacific, it has looked to countries such as India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand to assist. The warming of US-New Zealand defence relations, which has escalated rapidly over the last few years, confirms the importance to Washington of working more closely with likeminded countries in the wider region.

On that note, New Zealand may look to deepen its relationship with France, including the France, Australia, New Zealand Agreement signed in 1992, to facilitate better maritime relations in the Indo-Pacific between the countries concerned. While that agreement

included provision for the better sharing of intelligence, the Five Eyes arrangements will continue to be NZ's primary and preeminent intelligence partnership.

The Labour-led Government is also likely to strengthen its relations with countries such as India and Indonesia, continuing from where the previous government left off. The process may mature into a defence partnership.

In that process, New Zealand and India are expected to also increase their military co-operation. As part of India's power projection efforts in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi has decided to strengthen its Eastern Fleet in Vishakhapatnam and the tri-command service in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

At present, India and New Zealand are strategic partners. To better facilitate defence linkages, NZ is expected to appoint a Defence Adviser to India. The idea of sending a Defence Adviser to New Delhi was first mooted during former Prime Minister John Key's [visit to India](#), way back in June 2011, but is still yet to happen.

On the other hand, there are indications that New Zealand will view the revived Quadrilateral Security Initiative positively and may join as an observer in the annual *Malabar* and *AUSINDEX* exercises.

While India is clearly the region's second rising power, New Zealand's relationship with India is underdeveloped, to say the least. The White Paper 2016 notes that 'New Zealand's engagement with India, both bilaterally and in regional institutions, will continue to expand.' The Defence Assessment 2014 is more direct, describing India's growing power as 'more an opportunity for New Zealand than a threat. This is likely to be reflected in greater military engagement.'

That coincides with New Zealand's interests in South-East Asia's Indian Ocean littoral and its long-standing commitments under the FPDA. India's increased power projection in the region could benefit New Zealand's strategic interests, which tend to parallel those of Australia, Japan and the United States. Given the expansion by Australia and India of their strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific region, Wellington will also likely seek to enhance its relationship with India in the region, including co-operation in the South China Sea. NZ has conducted [aerial patrols](#) in the South China Sea for many years and remains a participant in FPDA exercises.

One of the important aspects of expanding Wellington's commitment to the FPDA will be managing the relationship that it has with Indonesia. At times, a balancing act may be required for NZ to handle both its relations with Indonesia and its commitment to the other FPDA countries, whose views do not always agree with those held by Jakarta.

Another issue that the Ardern Government may find itself dealing with is related to Indonesia and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). Expanding strategic ties with Australia and Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific may result in tricky relations with the MSG, as many members of that group oppose Jakarta's role in West Papua.

Further, New Zealand, as a South Pacific country, may also face a tough balancing act in its commitment to the Pacific Islands Forum, where many members of the MSG are ready to accept Beijing's presence in the islands. In fact, the very successful policy of courting Beijing through trade has, in many ways, resulted in Beijing's effective intrusion into NZ's traditional sphere of influence in the South Pacific.

The 27 February and 1 March foreign policy speeches of [Ardern](#) and [Peters](#), respectively, in which they pledged that their government would do more in the South Pacific, together with the high-profile week-long "Pacific Mission" that took both to Samoa, Niue, Tonga and the Cook Islands, all indicate a decided attempt to retrieve at least some of that lost influence.

Even if the term Indo-Pacific did not appear in either speech, a strategic horizon that incorporates the notion of the Indo-Pacific will include Wellington's commitment to the FPDA, broad (but not always unequivocal) support for Australia's strategic priorities in the region and the overall commitment to keeping the US engaged positively in the region. That could see the NZDF co-operating more closely and frequently with, for instance, the United States Pacific, Central and, even, Africa Commands. In a specifically maritime Indo-Pacific context, that would bring greater liaison between the RNZN and the US Fifth and Seventh Fleets.

Under Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand will continue to give importance to ensuring stability and balancing its trade and security commitments in the broadest sense of the Indo-Pacific region. That will mean further cementing its alliance commitments with Australia, France and the United States while actively improving the relationships with India and Indonesia.

About the Author: Balaji Chandramohan is Editor of the 'Asia for World Security Network' and a correspondent for the Auckland-based newspaper, Indian Newslink. He is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and the New Zealand Labour Party.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au