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NEW ZEALAND EXPANDS DEFENCE TIES WITH CHINA

The visit this week of General Fan Changlong, Vice Chairman of China’s powerful Central Military Commission marks a welcome further step forward in the strengthening of defence links between China and New Zealand. Progress in building the defence dimension of our bilateral relationship is important because it demonstrates that New Zealand does not want a relationship with China solely focussed on trade and other forms of economic activity vital though they are for our continued economic security. Building the defence connection recognises China’s rapidly growing role and presence in the Asia-Pacific region and the desirability of engaging China where our security and other interests intersect.

Defence links have been developing over the past decade, and have notably gathered steam in the last two years. There were reciprocal naval visits last year which included an opportunity for New Zealand sailors to “ship-ride” on PLA Naval vessels; earlier this year Chinese naval divers operated from HMNZS CANTERBURY during a 14 nation disaster response exercise off the coast of Auckland.

Another first for the relationship was New Zealand’s hosting in 2013 of Exercise Phoenix Spirit, a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief planning exercise that had previously been a trilateral event involving Australia, China and New Zealand. The 2013 exercise included for the first time the United States signalling New Zealand’s interest in helping to build defence engagement between China and the United States. It is China’s turn this year to host this exercise which will be called Cooperative Spirit. New Zealand and China also worked together in the search for MH 370. China made a major contribution to that mission.

In their joint statement New Zealand’s Defence Minister, Jonathan Coleman and Gen Fan agreed that the development of defence ties is an important component in the “comprehensive, cooperative and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship”. The statement signalled new avenues for cooperation.

China and New Zealand will look to enhance defence cooperation in the South Pacific particularly in the key area of humanitarian assistance and relief in the wake of natural

disasters, a perennial problem for the region which is likely to get worse with the effects of climate change. The Chinese military have a wealth of experience in responding to the many natural disasters in their country and coupled with our own familiarity with operating conditions in the South Pacific, Chinese support along with that of our traditional partners, would be of considerable benefit to our island neighbours. This could open the door to joint cooperation in the provision of medical and engineering support for South Pacific communities.

The joint statement also signalled cooperation in peacekeeping. The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) has acquired a wealth of peacekeeping experience over more than six decades. While China's peacekeeping commitments is more recent, China has quickly become the largest contributor to United Nations peacekeeping missions among the Permanent Five, and is the 13th largest contributor overall. In addition to providing medical, logistic and engineering personnel, China now also contributes combat personnel. This common interest in supporting United Nations efforts to bring an end to conflict provides ample scope for cooperation between the NZDF and the PLA. Perhaps prospects for a joint commitment could be explored. That would be another significant first in a bilateral relationship characterised by many "firsts".

The joint statement also noted that the two sides had discussed ways to further regional cooperation in maritime security. This is an area of great importance to both countries especially given recent tensions in the South China Sea and East Sea. The importance New Zealand attaches to regional cooperation in maritime security is reflected in co-chairmanship (with Brunei) of the maritime security working group established by the recently formed ASEAN Defence Ministers plus eight forum. China's contributions to that work are welcome. New Zealand welcomed China's chairing for the first time of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium earlier this year in which agreement was reached on a voluntary code for unplanned encounters at sea. There is much more than can and needs to be done and plenty of opportunity to explore mechanisms for mitigating the effects of incidents at sea. Counter-piracy provides another opportunity for cooperation in the maritime domain given both navies' extensive experience in this role.

Chief of Defence Force, Lt Gen Tim Keating, is on record as stating that the strengthening of defence ties between China and New Zealand remains a priority for New Zealand. He is keen to see the expansion of operational and tactical level cooperation to enhance trust and understanding amongst junior and mid-level officers. It is a very sensible and worthwhile step which will no doubt be one of the subjects discussed when the 7th China-New Zealand strategic defence dialogue takes place later this year in China.

Defence cooperation between China and New Zealand has come a long way in a relatively short time. The rapidly growing importance to New Zealand of the Asia Pacific and of the

bilateral relationship with China, make a sound argument for further strengthening defence engagement with China in both bilateral and regional settings. Gen Fan's visit was an important step along this path.

This visit should also be seen as recognition that New Zealand does not intend to place all its military relationship eggs in a single 'Five Eyes' basket. Diversification of military links makes absolute sense in a fluid strategic environment.

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