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THE ANZAC DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP: MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

Australia is New Zealand's principal defence partner. The defence relationship is our most important. The last years of the previous Australian Government saw some solid gains in the relationship. Those gains serve as a welcome platform to take the relationship forward as both countries continue to face budgetary pressures and a range of security challenges. So can we glean the Coalition's intentions in respect of New Zealand from a perusal of their defence manifesto?

Unsurprisingly the Australian Coalition's defence manifesto focuses on the alliance with the United States. That alliance is described as the "vital underpinning of our security and defence arrangements". There is a commitment to restore "Australia's reputation as a trustworthy and valued ally", {from this side of the Tasman we would not have thought that was in any doubt}, and to look to areas where it would be in both countries' interests to deepen the alliance building on the rotation of a United States brigade through Darwin, to assist the United States with its objective of remaining forward-deployed in the Asia Pacific region.

There is a reference to fostering security and stability in the immediate neighbourhood and Indonesia, Timor Leste, and the South Pacific island states, are mentioned in this regard. There is no explicit reference to the trans-Tasman defence relationship, but there is a general comment about ensuring that "Australia works with its allies, particularly the United States, in the wider world". It may well be that the authors of the manifesto had New Zealand in mind here although a more appropriate reference would have been to the immediate neighbourhood rather than the "wider world".

The manifesto addresses major capability issues and specifically the huge ticket items such as the future submarine force and the joint strike fighter and supports both providing Defence Chiefs advise them that both should proceed as planned. There is a commitment to consider the need for unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles. The manifesto also pledges not to make any more cuts to defence funding which will be a challenge given the size of the Australian

defence Vote and the depth of the budgetary hole facing the new Administration, and to restore defence funding to 2% of GDP within a decade. {It is currently 1.59% of GDP, the lowest level since 1936}. There is also the widely signalled commitment to undertake a new Defence White Paper within 18 months.

Given the importance of the defence relationship to New Zealand it can be assumed that Defence Minister Coleman will seek an early meeting with his new Australian counterpart, who is tipped to be Senator David Johnston, {who like his predecessor also hails from Western Australia}, to discuss recent progress in strengthening the relationship and how that might be taken forward.

Minister Smith was an enthusiastic advocate for a stronger trans-Tasman defence relationship and he and his then New Zealand counterpart, Dr Wayne Mapp, tasked their officials in 2011 to undertake a thorough review of that relationship with the intention of improving engagement structures, ensuring cost-efficient cooperation and developing complementary military capabilities. Earlier that year the ANZAC South Pacific-focused Ready Response Force had been established for joint emergency response in the region, with the aim of further strengthening the ability to operate together, and to build on our collaborative experiences in Solomon Islands with the RAMSI mission and Timor Leste.

Announcing the outcome of that review in January 2012, Minister Smith and the Hon Jonathan Coleman, welcomed a new ANZ Defence relationship Framework which would shape future strategic cooperation and set priorities for ANZAC engagement. The Framework introduced regular strategic discussions between senior civilian and military personnel to ensure that policy settings, military capabilities, and bilateral defence activities would be considered in a more orderly, rigorous and comprehensive way. The Ministers also announced a new track 1.5 bilateral security dialogue involving officials and think tank experts to enhance understanding of the security challenges facing both countries, particularly in the immediate region.

Ministers agreed their officials must explore opportunities for cooperation at all levels of military capability development and sustainment to promote innovation, realise cost-savings, and ensure continued interoperability, and that such opportunities should be identified before decisions are taken.

When they met again in November 2012, the Ministers agreed to increase collaboration between the two Navies in sealift and afloat support. A mutual sealift cooperation programme would allow for cross-crewing of RAN and RNZN vessels and afloat support to each other's fleets. This was a significant step forward in the relationship reflecting a major change in Australia's approach to mutual support. The Ministers noted that following on from

the successful secondments of New Zealand Navy personnel to Australian warships, Australia would provide seconded crew to the New Zealand Navy in 2013.

There was also a renewed commitment to working more closely with South Pacific neighbours. In this respect Ministers referred to the close cooperation between the two defence forces in support of Papua New Guinea's 2012 national elections which had contributed significantly to easing the logistic challenges of facilitating the voting process in a country with such rugged terrain. And they reiterated their commitment to the first ever meeting of South Pacific Defence Ministers which subsequently took place this May in Nuku'alofa.

The regional meeting of Defence Ministers was at the initiative of Minister Smith and was greatly appreciated by Papua New Guinea and Tonga. There was agreement to expand cooperation among the region's military forces {with the notable exception of the Fijian military whose predilection for coups has sidelined them for the time being}, to help respond to regional challenges. Particular attention was given to maritime security cooperation, an important focus for our South Pacific neighbours.

With a new defence framework in place, a commitment to mutual support that will enhance the ability of both countries to meet common security challenges in our immediate region, and an overdue reaching out to South Pacific Defence Ministers to give them a voice in regional security decisions, it is no exaggeration to say that the ANZAC defence relationship now has stronger underpinnings than at any previous point in its history. An early commitment by the new Australian Government to build on this momentum both bilaterally and regionally with New Zealand would be very useful.

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