

# AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND: THE DEFENCE POLICY GULF

The Australian and New Zealand governments have approached the formulation of defence policies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in strikingly different fashion. The outcome so far suggests a deep trans-Tasman rift on defence issues.

Australia has concluded a wide-ranging public discussion process. Australians, it is reported, want greater defence spending, maximum self-reliance within the alliance with the United States, and a force structured "to maintain a war-fighting capability". The Government in Canberra will declare its hand in a Defence White Paper to be published in December. New Zealand instead opted for the Delphic oracle approach. Seekers after enlightenment must make do with a few enigmatic pronouncements.

The New Zealand base document is a brief, capsular and skeletal paper, Government's *Defence Policy Framework*, which drew from a 1999 report, *Defence Beyond 2000*, by Parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee. The Framework paper asserts that the Select Committee report had "considerable public and parliamentary support" and thus provided a "sensible foundation for building a lasting, long-term consensus on defence". There was no consensus. The then government members of the Select Committee (now in opposition) were outvoted by their coalition partners and dissented from the report's conclusions, submitting a minority report. The Framework paper itself is devoid of analysis of the fundamental issues of security policies and defence force development. Two useful associated papers provide important background: New Zealand's Foreign and Security Policy Challenges, issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Security Assessment 2000, from the External Assessments Bureau. (The former provides clues to the rationale behind the broad prescriptions in the Framework paper; the latter surveys future trends.)

The principal points in the Framework are:

- New Zealand can "best contribute to regional stability and global peace by promoting comprehensive security" through diplomacy, emphasis on arms control and disarmament, environmental initiatives, development

assistance and building trade and cultural links. Commitment to the UN Charter will underpin New Zealand's efforts on behalf of international peace and security - along with maintaining New Zealand's nuclear-free status and promoting a nuclear-free South Pacific.

- New Zealand is not directly threatened and "not likely to be involved in widespread armed conflict".

- "The government recognises the need to work collaboratively with like-minded partners." (New Zealand, it seems, can refer only indirectly to the United States, former ally and dominant strategic actor in the Pacific). Nevertheless, "There is no strategic partnership closer than that with Australia."

- National defence interests are: protection of "territorial sovereignty, meeting shared alliance commitments to Australia, (in pursuit of common security interests) and fulfilling obligations and responsibilities in the South Pacific"; the wider Asian-Pacific strategic environment, "of which we are a part", is "also relevant".

- Activities under the Five Power Defence Agreement will continue, building on "existing bilateral defence relations with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines" - Indonesia has been dropped. New Zealand's security policy in the region is also to have an active APEC and ARF focus, to be constructive about human rights and to offer, where possible, mediation and peace support operations.

- The MFAT paper amplifies these generalisations, giving emphasis to possible contributions to UN and other collective activities in Asia and "further afield" and offers some clues about the New Zealand approach to the global roles of the United States and policy towards Washington.

- The NZDF force structure needed to do all this is not examined.

On this basis the Labour Government has given priority to equipping the New Zealand army for peace operations, accepting that effective combat capabilities

are required. The other two services might well be confined to transport and other supporting roles, the RNZAF having been denied an opportunity to re-equip its strike wing with F16s and to upgrade its P3 Orion surveillance aircraft, and the RNZN appears to have little chance of receiving its hoped-for third ANZAC frigate.

The Australian Public Discussion Paper examines the issues on a wider canvas:

- Australian strategic interests lie in “the effectiveness of the UN and the US [author’s underlining] in upholding an international system which deters aggression and works against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”.

- The US role in Asian-Pacific region “has been vital”; there is cause for confidence that it will be maintained “and every reason for Australia to continue to support it”. The ANZUS alliance and the ultimate security guarantee it provides for Australia are not questioned - although the implications of giving priority to defence of “our continent without reliance on our allies’ combat forces” are put up for consideration (Australia presumably acknowledges here, in a backhand way, that ANZUS provides it with an ally in New Zealand as well). The three tiers of ANZUS Treaty obligations are spelt out - defence force interaction; consultation in the event of threat; and action “to meet the common danger, in accordance with constitutional processes”.

- In the Asia-Pacific region, the roles of the established great powers, the United States and Japan, are underscored; Australia can best promote its regional interests by supporting the United States in its stabilising role.

- The roles of the force elements of the ADF are examined in detail. The traditional Australian dilemma over the relative weight to be given to capabilities for wider global roles, as against ensuring the defence of continental Australia, is spelled out.

- In the “Nearer Region”, defined as “maritime Southeast Asia and the closer islands of the Southwest Pacific”, the importance of Indonesia’s “stability and cohesion” is stressed while the deterioration in political and social circumstances in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands is noted. New Zealand gets its only mention here: “In the South Pacific, New Zealand remains an ally for Australia.”

- Australia, it is stated, will continue to take an active part in a wide range of demanding “military operations

other than war” around the globe. Nevertheless, Australia’s “most immediate strategic interests are in the arc of islands stretching from Indonesia and East Timor through PNG to the islands of the South Pacific”. Any conceivable threat to Australia would have to pass through this region.

- The options for the appropriate national defence posture in the circumstances are presented, as they have been for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a choice between unqualified engagement with an alliance and self-reliance. But the inference is plain: an either/or choice is neither politically acceptable nor militarily feasible. Press reports indicate continued public support for effective Australian capabilities backed by ANZUS.

The presumption that the old ANZAC firm will always be in business in the defence field is still strongly held in New Zealand. Good things were done together in Bougainville. The INTERFET/UNTAET operations in East Timor certainly demonstrate that a high degree of mutual military confidence and interoperability between Australian and New Zealand forces remains an important strategic asset for both countries. A shared current commitment to conflict resolution in the Solomon Islands may be a pointer to things to come across the so-called ‘arc of instability’ running from East Timor across Melanesia, and perhaps ranging from as far as Northern Sumatra to Polynesia.

Effective defence alliances nevertheless rest on fundamentally shared commitments to agreed interests. There’s the rub. New Zealand shies off harmonisation of force development decisions with Australia in ways which would contribute to the overall security interests of an ‘Australasian’ strategic area. New Zealand cannot say that it shares Australian concerns about wider Asian-Pacific security; to do so would require confrontation with the anomaly of New Zealand espousal of an alliance relationship with Australia, but not with Australia’s own super-power ally, the United States. Defence spending is out of kilter: Australia spent \$A11.2 billion (\$US 7.3b) in 1999 or about \$A700 (\$US 538) per capita and is now proposing a substantial increase. The New Zealand defence budget was \$NZ 1.6 billion (\$US846m) in 1999 or about \$NZ 420 (\$US225) per head and there is little hope of any meaningful increase.

From these two review processes it is evident that Australia and New Zealand cannot set a broad common security agenda. Without that, claims to an Australia-New Zealand ‘alliance’ rest on sand.