

US urges New Zealand to ramp-up military capacity to police the Pacific

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Following his participation at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit held in Tonga from August 26–30, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell flew to Vanuatu to dedicate the newest US Embassy before travelling on to New Zealand.

The stopovers were the latest in a series of high-level visits by senior US officials as Washington seeks to secure its unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance over the Pacific amid advanced preparations for war against China. The PIF summit approved a far-reaching Pacific policing initiative, backed by the US, to strengthen Australia's strategic positioning against Beijing.

In New Zealand, Campbell co-chaired a US-New Zealand Strategic Dialogue summit, met with NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters and senior government officials, and launched a Critical and Emerging Technology Dialogue. According to the US State Department, the parties “explored cooperation on critical technologies like AI and biotechnology and on the digital economy, including information and communication technologies.”

In an interview with *Newsroom*, Campbell said that the US and Australia have “encouraged” New Zealand to invest more in its armed forces, especially in patrolling and policing the Pacific. He had talked to NZ Prime Minister Christopher Luxon in Tonga and had “high confidence” that New Zealand will increase its military capacity.

Campbell declared: “We do want to see more investments in their armed forces. We do think the maritime domain is important and we think that this is an arena where New Zealand's contributions are natural.” Asked about the state of the US-NZ relationship, he called it a “strong, improving, deeply respectful... partnership” that is “central to what we're seeking to accomplish together in the Pacific.”

Successive Labour and National Party-led governments have ramped up military spending significantly. The Air Force recently took delivery of its first new Boeing P-8 Poseidon aircraft, which will provide “interoperability” with US forces. The four P-8s, costing a total of \$2.3 billion, are described by Boeing as “multi-mission maritime patrol

aircraft, excelling at anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and search and rescue.”

Wellington is preparing a new Defence Capability Plan, which will further boost military spending on navy ships, Air Force planes and other hardware.

The target of this build-up was underscored in a “Security Threat Environment” report by New Zealand's Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS), released just days after Campbell's visit. The report was undoubtedly prepared in consultation with US intelligence agencies, with which New Zealand works closely as a member of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing network.

The NZSIS designates Russia and China as strategic “threats” and accuses both countries of “foreign interference” in New Zealand, without providing actual evidence. It states that China is fostering “authoritarian tendencies” and undermining the “rules-based international order”—that is, the US-dominated imperialist order—in the Indo-Pacific region.

The National Party-NZ First-ACT coalition is engaged in a military and strategic step-up, not just with the US and Australia, but with other partners in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. In a speech to the Lowy Institute in Australia last month, Luxon declared: “Strategically, we are strongly supportive of the indispensable role played by the United States in the region, and the broader array of alliances and partnerships that buttress the region's prosperity and security.”

In the US in July, Luxon told the *Financial Times* he was “very open” to participating in AUKUS Pillar 2, an explicitly anti-China military partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US. He described the NZ Defence Force as a “force multiplier for Australia and the US and other partners.”

Following the Tonga Summit, Luxon took off on a visit to Malaysia and South Korea. He has already this year visited Australia three times plus Fiji, Japan, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga and the US

The central aim of these trips is to assert New Zealand's role as a minor imperialist power within the US-led web of alliances. Since World War II, New Zealand's ruling class has relied on support from the US to maintain its own neo-colonial interests in the island states including Niue, Kiribati, the Cook Islands, Tonga and Samoa.

Visiting the Philippines in April, Luxon and President Marcos agreed on enabling the countries' militaries "to work alongside one another in a more frictionless manner." In Japan in June, Luxon and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pledged to strengthen military cooperation in the Pacific, share more classified information, and increase joint "activities and exercises, including in the area of maritime security."

Luxon's current trip to Malaysia and South Korea will extend the diplomatic and military build-up aimed against China. A joint statement with Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim emphasised the two countries' "long-standing defence relationship, dating back to the Second World War," and confirmed they will maintain regular defence cooperation.

The South Korean visit is particularly significant. South Korea, Japan, New Zealand and Australia attended the NATO summit in Washington in July. The White House welcomed their participation, declaring that the war against Russia in Ukraine was connected with the "threats and challenges" facing the Indo-Pacific. New Zealand has stationed about 50 military personnel in South Korea as part of the military encirclement of China and North Korea.

Foreign Minister Peters has also travelled extensively, especially in the Pacific region. In the lead-up to the PIF summit, Peters headed to the Pacific for his fifth tour since December, to Fiji and the US neo-colonies in Micronesia: the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau.

Peters' agenda echoes that of Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong, who has made repeated trips to line-up impoverished Pacific states behind Washington's aggressive confrontation with China, issuing thinly veiled threats about the consequences of any turn toward Beijing.

Journalist Mick Hall reports that Wellington is now a key player in manoeuvres to keep the Pacific countries outside of China's orbit and "enmeshed instead in Western military architecture." Writing in *Consortium News* last month, Hall revealed that NZ Defence Ministry briefing documents show that NZ has been pushing for the PIF to be structurally linked to the pro-imperialist South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM).

The SPDMM regional defence ministers meet annually in what is described as "the only ministerial-level defence and

security forum in the South Pacific." It is focused on maintaining US hegemony, by "coordination of actions against security threats in the region."

The last summit, hosted by France in New Caledonia in December 2023, was attended by senior civilian and military officials from Australia, France, New Zealand, Chile, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga, plus observers from the US, the UK, and Japan. The PIF Secretariat has been invited to send an observer to SPDMM Defence Ministers' meetings, the next one due in New Zealand in November.

In all this, the National-led government is proceeding with bipartisan support from the opposition Labour Party. The 2017–2023 Labour government, which included the Greens, supported the US-led militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region and sent troops to Britain to train Ukrainian forces to fight against Russia.

A section of NZ's ruling establishment, led principally by former Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark and ex-National Party leader Don Brash, have expressed concern that Luxon's explicit alignment with the US will make it difficult to maintain relations with China, New Zealand's largest trading partner. These politicians support the US alliance—Clark's government sent troops to the illegal US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—and there is no question that they would line up behind a US-led war with China.

The entire Pacific region is being placed on a war footing, without the consent of the population, who have not been consulted. There is widespread anti-war sentiment in New Zealand itself, as shown by 11 months of ongoing protests against the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, which is backed by the Luxon government. Meanwhile, the increase in military spending is being funded through brutal cuts to public services and attacks on living standards, which is paving the way for renewed struggles of the working class at home.



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