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New Zealand defence policy targets China, Russia

New Zealand's Labour-led government released a new Strategic Defence Policy Statement on July 6 which for the first time explicitly targets China and Russia as the principal "threats" to the "international community."

The 40-page document, released by Defence Minister Ron Mark, supersedes a 2016 Defence White Paper, which set out the then National Party government's expectations for defence "over the coming decades." The new statement, just two years later, represents a sharp shift to the right by the Labour-NZ First-Green Party government. It echoes the US Trump administration's 2018 National Defence Strategy demanding stepped-up preparations for looming inter-imperialist conflicts.

Mark, an MP for the right-wing populist NZ First Party and former soldier, said the global strategic situation had changed since 2016. "We live in turbulent times, the world is changing and there has been a re-emergence of great power competition," he declared.

According to Mark, emerging transnational threats "will disrupt New Zealand's neighbourhood in ways not previously seen." The document defines "the neighbourhood" as the entire South Pacific "from the South Pole to the Equator." NZ armed forces must be ready to "operate independently" or "lead combined operations" throughout this vast area.

The document foreshadows a range of aggressive measures to protect "national security." These include, externally, "engaging in targeted interventions offshore to protect New Zealand's interests," and internally, preventing "activities aimed at undermining or overturning Government institutions, principles and values"—a clear warning to the increasingly restive working class.

Mark declared the government is “clear-eyed” regarding the forces disrupting the global “rules-based order.” So-called “rules-based” order routinely invoked by Washington is the established post-WWII international system which the US dominates and decides the rules to protect its interests. The dominant sections of the NZ ruling elite are openly committed to collaborating with Washington’s drive to war against China.

Labour and its partners assumed office following an extraordinary intervention by US ambassador Scott Brown during coalition negotiations after last September’s election. Brown publicly criticised National’s hesitancy to fully endorse Trump’s threats against North Korea, implicitly warning that Washington expected the incoming administration to fall into line.

Significantly, the defence statement identifies a series of global strategic “threats,” including the rise of China, Russian “interference,” climate change, cyber security, contested geographical areas and the “risks and opportunities” of space. It will pave the way for a multi-billion dollar upgrade to military capabilities to ensure “combat readiness” and improved “inter-operability” between NZ armed forces and allies Australia and the US.

Speaking on TVNZ1’s “Q+A” program, Mark confirmed the government will proceed with National’s previously announced \$20 billion military expansion program, beginning with a \$NZ2 billion purchase of new anti-submarine aircraft. He brushed aside questions about restraints on health and education expenditure, claiming New Zealanders would “understand” that troops in the Asia-Pacific and Middle East need to be “properly equipped.”

Topping the list of “international concerns” is China’s “confident assertion” of its interests, expansion through the Belt and Road global infrastructure initiative, military modernisation and expansion, and “refusal to engage with an international tribunal ruling on the status of sovereignty claims in disputed areas of maritime Asia.”

With China placed as New Zealand’s second most important trading partner, the statement acknowledges its “investment in institutions, increased global trade, peacekeeping, and counter-piracy efforts.” However, Beijing is hypocritically singled out for sharp criticism over failing to adopt “governance and values aligned with those of New Zealand,” for example on “human rights”—at the point where New Zealand and its allies are eroding and destroying basic democratic rights.

Mark denied that the document’s “stronger, more frank stance” would come as a surprise to Beijing. But on Monday, Acting Prime Minister Winston Peters admitted the Chinese

government had made clear its concern over the paper, both through its ambassador in Wellington and New Zealand's ambassador in Beijing. China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said China had "lodged stern representations with New Zealand on the wrong remarks it has made on China."

The report asserts that throughout Europe and Asia, "non-democratic and democratic systems are in strategic competition." It accuses Russia of having "attempted to discredit Western democracy by challenging its 'internal coherence.'" It repeats the false claims by Western intelligence agencies concerning Russia's "invasion" of Georgia, "cyber-enabled information operations" in the US and UK elections, and its purported "use of military force." New Zealand's "strengthened" relationship with NATO is endorsed.

A significant section of the report, headed "Challenges to Open Societies," highlights the fears in ruling circles of deepening popular opposition to the established institutions arising from "the accelerating gap between the very wealthy and the working poor," as well as "anxiety" arising from immigration.

Citing the 2011 Arab Spring—the revolutions which toppled leaders in Tunisia and Egypt—as an example of "destabilisation," it claims that widespread scepticism and hostility to the "international order" and "economic openness" are changing "governance for the worse." Behind the Orwellian language warning about "global agents of disorder," and "disregard [for] the rules and norms of the system," the implication of the document is that the country's armed forces must prepare to suppress protests against war, poverty and inequality.

The report underpins moves by both New Zealand and Australia to shore up their military and economic dominance in the southwest Pacific, in concert with Washington, the imperialist super-power. The Pacific Ocean is once again becoming a key geo-strategic battleground, as it was in World War II.

Climate change in the Pacific resulting in "displacement and migration" is identified as a looming threat, with the potential to "destabilise areas with weak governance," thus magnifying "traditional security challenges." What this implies can already be seen in the biennial Southern Katipo military exercises. These involve more than 2,000 New Zealand and allied military personnel in rehearsals for an armed incursion into the South Pacific to quell civil unrest and impose military order.

The report underscores the wide sweep of New Zealand's imperialist ambitions. It notes that NZ troops have operated in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Korea, Timor-Leste, the Horn of Africa, Iraq, Solomon Islands and Tonga. A new responsibility for the Defence

Force is to protect New Zealand's claim to "territorial sovereignty" in the Ross Dependency in Antarctica. Commitment to the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance is reaffirmed.

Beyond the immediate "threats," the document posits a dystopian future of endless conflicts, military engagements and wars—both within and between states. The "potential disruptors" include new technologies, "extremist ideologies" and "transnational organised crime." The broad domains of "cyber and space" bring, it warns, both "vulnerabilities and opportunities."

There has been no criticism in the media of the statement's war-mongering. The Greens, who are part of the government, have only criticised the "expensive" war-making capabilities of the new Poseidon aircraft. The pro-Labour *Daily Blog* endorsed the document, approving the military's more "offensive" stance, and warning against Beijing stoking "pro-China protests on the streets of Auckland to cause domestic unrest."

The Strategic Defence Policy Statement confirms the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Group (NZ)—that, like the Trump administration in the US, the New Zealand Labour-led government is preparing to prosecute imperialist war abroad and class war at home.