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Evolution, Not Revolution: The US-NZ Security Partnership

BY ROBERT AYSON AND DAVID CAPIE

Earthquakes have marked a tragic beginning to 2011 in the Asia-Pacific. Only weeks before the terrible events in Japan, in February the New Zealand city of Christchurch was shaken by a violent quake that killed more than 160 people and injured thousands. Among those caught up in the destruction, but fortunately unharmed, were dozens of participants attending the fourth US-NZ Partnership Forum, the latest in a series of events that have underscored an increasingly positive relationship between New Zealand and the United States.

The most visible sign of this new warmth was US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to New Zealand in November 2010, which culminated with the signing of the "Wellington Declaration." The 400-word document announced a US-NZ "strategic partnership" built on "practical cooperation" in the South Pacific, and enhanced dialogue including regular foreign minister level and political-military meetings. It also noted a joint commitment to tackle pressing challenges including climate change, nuclear proliferation, and extremism. In addition, there was a commitment to an expansion of US-NZ "commercial and trade relations."

Given the disagreement on nuclear issues that precipitated a suspension in US-NZ security relations in the mid-1980s, some observers might be tempted to read the Wellington Declaration as a dramatic return to cooperation under the trilateral Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) security treaty. While Secretary Clinton rightly acknowledged that the US-NZ bilateral relationship is "the best it has been in twenty-five years," it is not a return to the ANZUS status quo ante for two reasons.

First, the Wellington Declaration is not an alliance. For many years it has been clear that the price of a return to full ANZUS ties would be an overturning of New Zealand's nuclear-free legislation, something New Zealanders have consistently been unwilling to support. Conscious of this, the two countries have for some years sought to work around the problem. This declaration is the latest evidence that this pragmatic approach is working.

Second, the declaration does not represent a revolutionary change in the quality of the bilateral relationship. It is a significant step in a growing pattern of US-NZ security cooperation, but this is something that has been occurring for some time now. Much of the impetus harks back to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In addition to deploying Special Forces to Afghanistan, New Zealand has operated a successful Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamiyan Province since 2003. Other New Zealand Defense Force assets have been deployed to the Gulf and Indian Ocean as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

These contributions were welcomed in Washington and helped shape the view that it was counterproductive not to be working more closely with a country with which the United States has so many common interests. Officials in both the Bush and Obama

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administrations have publicly praised New Zealand’s contributions to shared international goals including non-proliferation and peacekeeping. Viewed in this context, the Wellington Declaration confirms New Zealand’s transition from “friend but not ally” to valued security partner.

New Zealand, in turn, has been keen to emphasize the value of its relationship with the United States. The country’s 2010 Defense White Paper, the first in more than a decade, pays particular attention to traditional security ties. It gives the US relationship a position second only to New Zealand’s alliance with Australia, referring to Washington as a “close security partner” and highlighting the benefits New Zealand gets from being an “engaged, active and stalwart partner of the US.”

As the White Paper also notes, there has been a “steady increase” in bilateral military contact and cooperation. Intelligence cooperation has resumed. But just as importantly, the security relationship also involves close cooperation on a wide range of non-traditional security issues, involving police, border security and emergency management personnel on a range of transnational issues of common concern. The sight of an 80-person US team helping to rescue people from the rubble in Christchurch was evidence of the practical benefits of bilateral cooperation on disaster relief.

This non-traditional security cooperation is particularly important in the South Pacific where a number of countries are extremely vulnerable to the negative consequences of climate change, natural disasters and economic shocks. As the United States reengages in the South Pacific, New Zealand is an obvious partner. The two countries share interests in promoting better governance, managing development assistance and tackling transnational crime.

It is clear to New Zealanders that Washington’s renewed interest in the South Pacific is driven above all by concerns that China is increasing its regional influence. While New Zealand is aware that China’s rise will create challenges as well as opportunities, officials will want to express the view that the China lens is just one way of looking at the South Pacific. This will no doubt be a topic for conversation in the regular high-level meetings anticipated in the Wellington Declaration. In addition to bilateral talks, there may be opportunities for more trilateral interactions bringing in Australia. In 2010, at US instigation, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell joined senior officials from Australia and New Zealand for discussions on the sidelines of the Pacific Islands Forum in Vanuatu. This seems likely to happen again in August, when the United States is expected to send its largest ever delegation to the forum’s meeting in Auckland.

In the wider Asia-Pacific there is no doubt that the rise of China is the number one issue and it is here that differences between the United States and New Zealand may emerge from time to time. The White Paper encourages a continuing US defense presence in the Asia-Pacific. New Zealand also supported US membership in the East Asia Summit. At the same time New Zealand will not want to get sucked into a destabilizing strategic competition between the United States and China. So far New Zealand has managed to build a highly rewarding economic relationship with China, including signing a Free Trade Agreement in 2008—the first developed economy to do so—while also developing closer security ties with the United States. Hard bargaining between Wellington and Washington over the future Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement also shows that New Zealand does not want to choose between its economic and security interests.

The tragic events of recent weeks have highlighted the value of practical bilateral cooperation between New Zealand and the United States aimed at solving real pressing problems. The challenge now will be to find ways to sustain that cooperation across a range of other issues and to give reality to the language of the Wellington Declaration.

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