

New Zealand Picks up on the Indo-Pacific

By David Scott

Traditionally, New Zealand's strategic focus has been on Australia and the South Pacific. As recently as 18 October, 2018, Ben King, New Zealand's Deputy Secretary for Americas and Asia said that "the term Indo-Pacific may not resonate in New Zealand yet." And this despite a July 2018 Strategic Defence Policy Statement that already pinpointed New Zealand's "Indo-Pacific partners reinforcing the rules based order" as being Australia, India, Japan and the United States. It is worth noting that the Strategic Defence Policy Statement gave lengthy details on the threat posed by China; in its Maritime Silk Road push into the Indian Ocean, its militarization of the South China Sea, and its push into the Pacific islands. Events from August 2019 to February 2020 reinforce that New Zealand is seeking out "Indo-Pacific" cooperation with these four particular "partners" (Japan, United States, India, Australia) over shared concerns about China.

Thus, on August 1, 2019, the Office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade signaled official adoption of "Indo-Pacific" foreign policy thinking in a press release affirming New Zealand's plan on "engaging with our regional partners on the challenges facing the Indo-Pacific and discussing how to deepen our cooperation."

With regard to Japan, the summit held on September 19, 2019 between New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her counterpart Shinzo Abe pursued an Indo-Pacific focus. The resulting Joint Statement, titled Taking the Japan-New Zealand Strategic Cooperative Partnership to the Next Level, recorded that "the two leaders reiterated their commitment to working proactively together to maintain and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region for ensuring a free, open and rules-based international order." In addition, "the two leaders raised concerns about the situation in the South China Sea," with "particular regard to land reclamation, militarization of such islands," and the need to "uphold international law, freedom of navigation and overflight."

With regard to the United States, New Zealand's Minister for Defense Ron Mark met his American counterpart Mark Esper in Washington, D.C. on January 25, 2020. The New Zealand Ministry of Defense noted that "the main focus of the meeting was to discuss challenges that New Zealand and the United States share in the Indo-Pacific region." From Washington, Mark flew to Hawaii, his first visit to the Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and discussed explicit security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

A significant Indo-Pacific re-adjustment was shown with India on February 27, 2020 when the Foreign Minister Winston Peters met his Indian counterpart, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, with Peters noting that "India is a priority relationship for New Zealand. We share common democratic traditions, growing two-way trade, extensive people-to-people links, and a common strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific region."

Revealingly, Peters then delivered a lengthy speech, titled The Indo-Pacific: From Principles to Partnerships, at the Indian Council of World Affairs. He reflected on "the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept" and "the strategic reality of our shared Indo-Pacific region;" in which "New Zealand

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Indo-Pacific analyst for the NATO Defense College Foundation, explains that "New Zealand is seeking out "Indo-Pacific" cooperation with these four particular "partners" (Japan, United States, India, Australia) over shared concerns about China."

has direct interests in the Indo-Pacific's security" in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. Links with India were highlighted; "the emergence of the Indo-Pacific terminology recognizes these common interests. It unites New Zealand and India in a shared strategic geography. This is reflected in the alignment of our Indo-Pacific policies." Specific values were underpinned: "like India, we also want to see an Indo-Pacific that is open and inclusive; that is committed to transparency; that respects sovereignty"; that "adheres to international law; that upholds freedoms of overflight and navigation;" in which "we also know that safeguarding these principles and responding to the security concerns of our region will require collective action." These pinpointed values were implicitly phrased with China and the South China Sea in mind. The call for "collective action" implied New Zealand's readiness to make a contribution.

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Finally, New Zealand's relationship with Australia, traditionally focused on the South Pacific, also expanded its scope in the meeting between the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her counterpart Scott Morrison on February 28, 2020. Their media statement maintained convergence and cooperation in the South Pacific, but had a wider framework. Thus, they talked of their "mutual effort to support an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific region," "reaffirmed the benefits of open markets and inclusive regional economic integration in the Indo-Pacific;" "agreed on the importance of strengthening regional institutions in the Indo-Pacific that promote habits of cooperation on shared challenges, reinforce respect for international law;" and "welcomed ASEAN's adoption of its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific." Common concerns were elaborated over the South China Sea. With China in mind, they "expressed serious concern over developments in the South China Sea;" including "the continued militarization of disputed features, and destabilizing behavior at sea;" "reaffirmed the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight;" and urged claimants to "resolve maritime disputes peacefully, in accordance with international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)."

Looking forward, New Zealand will probably remain focused on the South Pacific (the focus of its "Pacific Reset" announced in March 2018) as the area for most effective use of its modest economic and military projection; including cooperation there with the United States, Australia and Japan. New Zealand participation in the U.S.-Australia-Japan Blue Dot Network (BDN) infrastructure initiative may be a development in countering China's Maritime Silk Road push. However, New Zealand may well reinforce its own input in Southeast Asia, where the New Zealand-Singapore Enhanced Partnership entering into force in January 2020 facilitates a greater New Zealand security presence. This increased New Zealand presence may be manifested through the Five Power Forces Arrangement (FPDFA), which brings together Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK. It might also be manifested in some supportive New Zealand freedom of navigation deployment into the South China Sea. There may well also be greater effort by New Zealand to work with India in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. Finally, given New Zealand's invocation of the Indo-Pacific in its dealings with the Australia, India, and the United States (the "Quad" set up again in November 2017), there may be closer New Zealand involvement with the Quad mechanism, which would be welcomed by all current Quad members.

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