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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Tom Peters
11.08.2019

US defence secretary, NATO chief visit New Zealand to strengthen military ties

US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper visited New Zealand on August 5–6 to further the integration of New Zealand into the US-led military preparations against China. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited at the same time, also promoting greater military collaboration with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government, including in Afghanistan.

Esper’s visit followed **AUSMIN talks** in Australia, where he **pledged** to ring China with missiles prohibited by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, from which the Trump administration recently withdrew. He told reporters this was necessary in the new “era of great power competition,” in which the US is seeking to push back against China’s economic expansion. Esper’s tour also included visits to Japan, South Korea and Mongolia.

New Zealand, a minor imperialist power, is a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance and active participant in US-led wars, with troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. New Zealand’s ruling elite, in return, relies on US support for its own neo-colonial domination over Pacific island countries, including Tonga, Samoa, Niue, and the Cook Islands.

Esper told the media in Auckland, “our militaries have made significant strides in defence cooperation and we greatly value New Zealand’s contributions to a free and open Pacific.” Under Ardern, who is glorified in the international media as the embodiment of “kindness,” New Zealand has significantly ramped up the alliance. A defence policy

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statement last year labelled China and Russia the main “threats” to the international order, echoing the Pentagon. Winston Peters, foreign minister and deputy prime minister from the right-wing nationalist and anti-immigrant NZ First Party, has repeatedly called for a stronger US military presence in the Pacific region to join Australia and NZ in deterring China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence.

Esper met with Peters and Defence Minister Ron Mark, who is also a member of NZ First, while Ardern spoke with Esper by phone and held talks with Stoltenberg.

Wellington made no criticism of Washington’s withdrawal from the INF and its threats against China. Nor did Ardern condemn Trump’s fascist and racist statements, which inspired both the Christchurch massacre on March 15 and the recent mass shooting in El Paso, Texas. Instead, she absurdly told Radio NZ that Trump had given “a very clear statement against hatred, white nationalism, violent extremism.”

Asked if New Zealand has been asked to contribute to the US military build-up in the Gulf shipping lanes in the standoff with Iran, Ardern said there had been “general approaches,” but no “specific request.” She refused to say how she would respond to such a request.

No details were released about the ministerial talks, however, on August 5 Stoltenberg gave a public talk hosted by Victoria University of Wellington’s Centre for Strategic Studies, in which the NATO leader made belligerent denunciations of Russia, China and Iran.

Stoltenberg declared that New Zealand faced “the same security challenges” as NATO powers, especially “great power competition.” He denounced Russia’s annexation of Crimea and repeated the US pretext for withdrawing from the INF Treaty, saying Russia had “violated” it. He hailed the increased US military presence in Europe, including “more troops, more exercises” and equipment in countries bordering Russia. He said nothing about the Trump administration’s threat, just days earlier, to deploy nuclear-capable missiles aimed at China.

The NATO leader denounced “China’s role and influence,” including actions in the South China Sea, and “investments in critical infrastructure in many countries, including in Europe.” This was threatening the “rules-based order,” i.e., the international order established by the US after World War II, Stoltenberg said.

He praised New Zealand’s role in Afghanistan “as one of our closest partners. New Zealand is still contributing troops and forces to our training mission in Afghanistan and

we are extremely grateful for that.” He also thanked New Zealand for being part of the US-led coalition against Islamic State, “in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere.”

On August 6, Ardern defended New Zealand’s 18 years of involvement in Afghanistan, saying it was to “enhance the involvement of women, including in peace negotiations and post-conflict processes.”

In fact, successive New Zealand governments have sent troops to the illegal imperialist wars in Afghanistan since the invasion in 2001, and Iraq since 2004. The aim of these wars, which have killed well over a million people, is to cement US hegemony in the resource-rich Middle East, at the expense of its rivals, such as China and Russia. New Zealand troops in Afghanistan have been implicated in war crimes, including the killing of women and children.

Coinciding with Esper and Stoltenberg’s visits, the Ardern government and sections of the media stepped up their campaign against supposed Chinese “interference” in New Zealand politics and at universities.

The government criticised the Chinese embassy for its recent statement of support for “patriotic” Chinese residents in Auckland who confronted student protesters against the Hong Kong extradition law. Foreign Minister Peters told reporters, “We want countries here to respect the rule of law and our freedom of speech,” particularly on “university campuses.”

Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent NATO-funded academic in New Zealand, told Radio NZ the statement was “a big deal, and I think it indicates an adjustment in New Zealand’s relationship with China that’s under way.” She also pointed to statements by Ardern about the need to “diversify” exports away from China, which is New Zealand’s main export market. Brady has advocated a much closer alliance with the US and a crackdown on China’s “influence” in New Zealand.

New Zealand governments, led by the Labour and National Parties, have previously sought to balance between their economic reliance on China and the long-standing military alliance with the US. However, as the US escalates its trade war and threats of nuclear war against China, this stance has become untenable and New Zealand’s ruling elite is falling into line with Washington.

10 August 2019