WORKING PAPER NO. 26

“NUCLEAR ALLERGY”: NEW ZEALAND’S ANTI-NUCLEAR STANCE AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC NUCLEAR FREE ZONE

By

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**Introduction (pages 1-halfway through 3)**

During the past three years the South Pacific has become the focus of growing attention and concern in the West- especially in the US and Australia. The causes of this concern are obvious. While long ignored or taken for granted because it was seen as stable and secure, the South Pacific region in the late 1980s seems to have become a sea of troubles.

In Fiji, two successive military coups in 1987 by the ultra-nationalist Colonel Rabuka have sent ripples of alarm throughout the region. In New Caledonia, a bitter ongoing independence struggle pits France and French ‘Caldoche’ white settlers against the indigenous Melanesian ‘Front Uni pour laLiberation des Kanaks’ (FLNKS). In Irian Jaya a small resistance group, ‘Organasi Papua Mcrdeka’ (OPM), which opposed Indonesian control of, and Javanese ‘transmigration’ to, Irian Jaya operates intermittently in the Papua New Guinea/Irian Jaya border area.

Concern has also been expressed about possible Libyan penetration of the region. Radical activists with the FLNKS have developed contacts with Libya, and in 1984 17 Kanaks spent a month undergoing ‘security training’ in Tripoli; OPM exiles have also established contacts with Libya.

These contacts, together with Libyan kinks to Vanuate (which has also established diplomatic relations with Cuba), have caused some alarm in the US and Australia. Both countries are also worried about the penetration of the region by the Soviets or their perceived surrogates- a concern which has been intensified by the upsurge in Soviet diplomatic overtures to the region and by the fishing agreements signed between Moscow and the island states of Kiribati (in 1985) abd Vanuate (in 1987).

The strategic significance of these events is a matter of considerable dispute. But they have undeniable generated concern- particularly in conservative circles in Australia and the US.

Meanwhile France’s ongoing nuclear test program at Mururoa in French Polynesia generates near-total opposition among the states of the region. French concern over a high profile campaign against the tests, which was being spear-headed by the Greenpeace organisation, led to the bombing of the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbour in July 1985 where one crew member was killed. Revelation of French responsibility for this act of state terrorism led to a bitter rift between France and New Zealand.

However from the US perspective, these are by no means the only regional developments of concern. Of equal, perhaps greater, consequence is New Zealand’s ban on visits by nuclear-powered and/or nuclear armed ships, and the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) Treaty signed in Rarotonga in 1985. New Zealand’s anti-nuclear stance has led to an apparent permanent rupture in the security relationship between the US and New Zealand, while Washington (together with France and the UK), refuse to sign the SPNFZ Treaty.

This paper examines US reactions to New Zealand’a anti-nuclear stace and to the SPNFZ Treaty. The first part of this paper reviews New Zealand’s anti-nuclear policy and the terms of the SPNFZ Treaty and considers the degree to which these examples of ‘nuclear allergy’ impede, or are said to impede, US military activities in the region. The conclusion considers the phenomenon of ‘nuclear allergy’ in a more general way and asks whether it is in fact a threat to Western security as the US claim.

**New Zealand’s Anti-Nuclear Policy (pages 3 onwards)**

When a new Labour government, under the leadership of David Lange, came to power in New Zealand in July 1984, it did so on an explicitly anti-nuclear platform which included the rejection of visits by nuclear-armed and/or nuclear-powered warships. The US was (and remains) adamantly opposed to New Zealand’s stance, arguing that the ANZUS allies are obliged by their alliance commitments to permit US naval visits and that the effective working of the alliance required such visits.

In February 1985, the new Labour government rejected an American request for the USS Buchanan to visit New Zealand. The Buchanan was capable of carrying nuclear-armed ASROC anti-submarine weapons- though it was widely believed within official circles that it was not in fact carrying them at the time. US officials, who apparently believed that they had an understanding with Prime Minister David Lange that the Buchanan would be admitted, were furious when permission was denied.

The Reagan Administration has argued that it is wholly unreasonable for the New Zealanders to expect to be defended by the US in the event of war, while denying access in peacetime to the ships that would defend them. New Zealand was portrayed in Washington as a ‘free-rider’ accepting the benefits of alliance protection, but refusing to ‘share the burden’ of alliance ‘costs’. US officials stressed that there was only one US Navy- not a nuclear Navy and a non-nuclear Navy- and Washington was certainly not going to create a non-nuclear Navy exclusively for New Zealand’s benefit. On top of this there was considerable American irritation at what was seen as New Zealand’s hubris in challenging the US. This feeling was well illustrated when William Lane, the US Ambassador to Australia who, following the Buchanan incident, stated that, “New Zealand’s Labour Government has been a bad boy and must be punished’.

At the heart of the disputes, however, were conceptions of ANZUS which were fundamentally incommensurate. For New Zealand, ANZUS was aregional, conventional security relationship; for the US, ANZUS was one element in a global network of alliances based on nuclear deterrence designed to contain the Soviet Union. Washington’s force was regional and Labour saw nuclear weapons as irrelevant to regional security; Washington’s forces was global and the Reagan Administration was the cohesion of global alliance relationships and the effective nuclear deterrence of the USSR as being indivisible.

Washington responded to the Kiwi rebuff by denying New Zealand access to military intelligence, by cutting military exchange visits, and by stopping military exercises between New Zealand and US forces. Initially, the core of the ANZUS alliance relationship- the US commitment to aid New Zealand if it were attacked- remained intact. However, in June 1986, the US withdrew its security commitment. This anticipated the successful passage of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone bill which a year later was to codify the government’s anti-nuclear policy into law. New Zealand’s status was downgraded from ally to that of ‘friend’. In September 1987 the Reagan Administration indicated that it would support a bill in Congress that would place a legal ban on security assistance and arms export preferences to New Zealand. The passage of this bill will enshrine in law what is already US policy towards New Zealand.

Why was the US so concerned about New Zealand’s actions? why did the ANZUS Council Communique, which followed the Buchanan row, claim that the visits of allied ships (possibly nuclear-armed) were ‘essential to the ANZUS alliance’, when in fact the infrequent visits of US ships to New Zealand were primarily courtesy calls and had almost no direct military significance.

New Zealand, which had a population of 3.8 million people, does not lie on major trade routes, nor does it control any strategic choke points. Its direct strategic significance to the US is minimal. Indeed an American official, asked about New Zealand’s strategic importance some years ago, described it as ‘a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica’. Moreover, notwithstanding the various manifestations of increased strategic complexity in the South Pacific noted above, the region has remained fortunately isolated from superpower military competition. The Soviet’s Navy surface combatants do not operate in the South Pacific and nor, at least as far as is publicly known, do its submarines.

Following the Buchanan crisis, US Secretary of State George Shultz argued that for the alliance to mean anything that armed forces of the alliance partners had to be able to exercise together. This was clearly true, but it missed the point that the New Zealand government had not been opposed to combined exercises, and that multi-nation exercises like RIMPAC in which New Zealand participated usually took place far from New Zealand shores and did not in fact require port visits. Moreover, although for a number of years in the 1960s and 1970s there were no US nuclear ship visits to New Zealand, there was no apparent diminution in the effectiveness of the alliance, neither did the US feel any need to bring sanctions to bear against the government of the day. So again the question arises- what was so special about Lange’s government’s actions in 1985?

The answer has little to do with the direct military significance of New Zealand’s actions for the US. It has everything to do with Administration fears that the ‘nuclear allergy’ might spread. ‘Nuclear allergy’ has become a portmanteau term to describe the various manifestations of political opposition (mostly in the West) to superpower nuclear policies. US concern about the ‘nuclear allergy’- or ‘Kiwi disease’ as it was sometimes called- was far more salient in the mid-1980s than previously. In this period, unlike the 1970s, a considerable number of US allied governments and political movements were challenging US global security policies. The Greek government was threatening to oust US bases from Greek soil; there was a powerful popular movement in Spain opposing Spanish membership of NATO; the Netherlands was debating whether or not to accept US cruise missiles onto its territory, and throughout the OECD countries peace movements were challenging the assumptions of the nuclear status quo. Washington correctly saw these challenges as directed more against the US than the USSR, and argued that the spectre of alliance dissension threatened to undermine deterrence and global stability by sending signals of weakening Western resolve to the opportunistic and expansionist Soviets.

[Pg. 8] It is against this background that the US reaction to New Zealand’s anti-nuclear stance must be understood. If New Zealand had been allowed to get away with its challenge to the status quo while still being able to count on the US to defend it, other countries might be tempted to follow suit. The ‘Kiwi disease’ could, in other words, ‘infect’ other, more important, US allies whose people were also antipathetic to ‘nuclearism.’ As one State Department official put it, “…unless we hold our allies’ feet to the fire over ship visits, one will run away and then the next.”

Although the Buchaan affair generated enormous publicity, New Zealand’s policy against nuclear war ship visits was not unique in the Pacific. Vanuatu has had an anti-nuclear policy since 1982 when a US ship visit was cancelled because the required assurance that no nuclear weapons were being carried was not given. The Solomon Islands has a similarly tough anti-nuclear policy. In February 1984, the Foreign Minister of the Solomon Islands announced that written assurances would be required from visiting vessels to the effect that they were neither nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered. Neither of these countries is a US ally, of course, so while the US [Pg.9] may reject their policies it cannot argue that they are incompatible with alliance commitments.

In 1983, Fiji placed a ban on visits by nuclear-armed and powered ships. This was, however, lifted in 1984 after US representations were made to the government in Suva. But in 1987 there were indications that the newly elected Labour government of Timoci Bavadra might follow New Zealand’s example and institute a nuclear ship ban- certainally the US was concerned that this was a possibility. Fiji’s Foreign Minister, Krishna Datt, stated on April 16th 1987 that New Zealand’s example had been an inspiration to Fiji and that other countries in the region should move in the same direction. Since the coup, Colonel Rabuka has attempted to justify his overthrow of the Bavadra government by claiming that Labour’s anti-nuclear and non-aligned sympathies were ‘leaning towards the communist countries.’

Although the ‘nuclear allergy’ is a fact of contemporary international politics, it is not at all clear that the US has furthered its security objectives in the region by its responses to the New Zealand ship [Pg.10] ban. Indeed there are some reasons to believe that the US stance has been counterproductive.

First, the publicity which followed the Buchanan incident may have exacerbated the very ‘demonstration effect’ that the US wanted to prevent. Labour’s anti-nuclear policy received relatively little publicity outside New Zealand until the Buchanan episode. Following the crisis, David Lange appeared on radio and TV talk shows across the US to put New Zealand’s point of view, beat Jerry Falwell in a televised debate at the Oxford Union, and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is unlikely that any of this would have happened had the confrontation over the Buchanan nit taken place.

Second, there is scant evidence that the US response to the crisis- i.e. the suspension of intelligence flows, joint exercises and so forth- has had a negative impact on the Lange government’s popularity. On the contrary Labour’s anti-nuclear stance remains extremely popular with the electorate. Moreover, according to public opinion polls published soon after the Buchanan affair, a majority of New Zealanders believed that they had been unfairly treated by the US and rejected the US claim that they shirked their ANZUS obligations.

Popular support for the government’s anti-nuclear stance also helps explain why the conservative National Party opposition sought in the 1987 election [Pg.11] campaign to present itself as an anti-nuclear party. Jim Bolger, the leader of the National Party, stated in July 1987, “we don’t want them [nuclear weapons] here, we don’t need them here and they [the Americans] don’t need them here…”

Although there was initially concern in Wellington that the US might bring economic sanctions to bear against New Zealand over the ship ban this has not happened. Indeed, trade with the US has actually increased since February 1985, as has tourism. (Ironically, Australia who opposed New Zealand’s anti-nuclear stance, has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in lost wheat and sugar sales as a consequence of US farm export policies; New Zealand, which is not a major exporter of any of these commodities has not been similarly affected.) If the US response to the Buchanan incident was intended to demonstrate that challenging American nuclear politics involved high costs for the challenger, it is by no means clear that it has succeeded.

New Zealand’s anti-nuclear stance has gained world-wide publicity while the Lange government, presenting itself to the electorate as David confronting the American nuclear Goliath, has not been harmed politically. Within the [Pg.12] Labour party itself, support for the government’s strong anti-nuclear stand and a desire to preserve it, has attenuated what otherwise could have ben a concerted and politically damaging assault from the Left on the Lange government’s radical free-market economic policy. In the 1987 New Zealand ellectio ANZUS was not a major issue. Labour won re-election despite extraordinarily high unemployment and inflation levels.

The Costs of the ANZUS Rupture:

There is no doubt that the break with the US, even if it incurred no domestic political costs for the Labour government, has had a decidedly negative impact on the operational capabilities of New Zealand’s armed forces. This is particularly true of the New Zealand Navy.

Exercises with allies are extremely important for small navies and it is in precisely this area that the NZ Navy has been most affected by the ANZUS split. In August 1985, the NZ Ministry of Defence revealed that:

…it had to cancel and restructure 22 joint exercises planned for 1985. This represented a loss of some 6,000 man days of training.

Moreover, ‘[w]hereas in 1983/84 the [NZ Navy] spent some 235 days exercising with foreign ships, in 1985/86 it had 63 days and in 1986/87, 78 [Pg. 13] days. New Zealand has also been excluded from the multi-nation RIMPAC exercises as well as ANZUS exercises.

But if the ANZUS split has had negative consequences for the New Zealand armed services, it has also been costly for the US and the other allies. New Zealand’s exclusion from the Pacific alliance network weakens the alliance as a whole, as well as isolating New Zealand. Even if the rupture in the alliance is eventually repaired, it will be difficult to return to the status quo ante. The lack of contact between the NZ and US armed services during the period of the rupture will have considerably degraded interoperability.

From the US perspective, it might seem to be particularly unfortunate that the split from New Zealand- which, unlike Australia, has traditionally seen its priorities and responsibilities as lying in the South-West Pacific- should have taken place at a time of growing concern about instability in the region.

Is there any way in which the crisis could have been avoided? One possibility would have been for the US to have publically rejected New Zealand’s anti-nuclear stance, but not to have requested permission from Wellington for a visit by a nuclear-capable ship. In this way both the confrontation and the consequent breakdown of the alliance could have been [Pg.14] avoided. The result would, of course, have been less than satisfactory for the US than the status quo ante, but would arguably have been better from Washington’s point of view than the present impasse. This is especially so since the difference between the current New Zealand position on ship visits and that of a number of other US allies is, in theory at least, not that great.

Like New Zealand, Denmark, Iceland and Japan also have policies which prohibit nuclear-armed ships visiting their ports. In the Danish and Iceland cases, unlike that of New Zealand, there is no legislation which permanently excludes nuclear weapons but, in accord with a NATO understanding of 1957, there is agreement that nuclear weapons not be deployed in a NATO state without the express permission of its government. In Japan’s case the three nuclear principals announced by Prime Minister Sato in 1966 stipulate, among other things, that Japan will not allow the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japanese territory.

[Pg.15] The difference between the Danish and New Zealand positions is interesting. Both prohibit the entry of nuclear-armed warships and neither country has a policy of asking if ships which request a visit are carrying nuclear weapons. The only difference between the policies of the two countries is that the New Zealanders, unlike the Danes, would try and determine whether the warships due to visit their country actually did carry nuclear weapons. New Zealand’s anti-nuclear legislation, passed more than two years after the Buchanan incident, requires the Prime Minister to ‘made a determination’ (but not one based on physical inspection or secret intelligence) as to whether a warship which was seeking to visit New Zealand was nuclear-armed. Quite how the Prime Minister would make such a determination has never been made clear.

Following the Buchanan crisis some of New Zealand officials still hoped that a compromise solution could be found. Since both the request for a ship visit and the New Zealand response to it could be made privately there would, it was argued, be no need to reveal the identity of a ship which had sought permission to visit, if Wellington had determined that it was nuclear-armed. Keeping such information from the Soviets had always been the central strategic rationale for the ‘neither confirm nor deny’ policy. This compromise would, however, let the Soviets know which ships were not carrying nuclear weapons.