

Will New Zealand Ever Rejoin ANZUS?

Gerald Hensley

Recent calls to lift the legislative ban on visits by nuclear powered and armed ships to New Zealand ports have so far fallen on deaf ears. Given that the original cause of this Cold War era dispute that led to New Zealand's abrupt departure from the ANZUS alliance in the 1980s no longer applies, relaxing the ban would mark the first step towards normalising its estranged relationship with the United States. But there is a formidable weight of inertia to be overcome as well as official resistance to any move to change.



Gerald Hensley is former New Zealand Secretary of Defence, a position he held from 1991 to 1999.

When it comes to trying to please Washington, no-one has been working harder than New Zealand in recent months. For all the Government's distaste for operations not overseen by the United Nations, it has sent troops to Iraq, Afghanistan (for the second time); it has a frigate on patrol in the Gulf as part of Operation Enduring Freedom; and it has despatched another Orion maritime patrol aircraft.

New Zealand does not have special foreign policy interests in the region. The motive for all this activity lies in Washington, not the Middle East. New Zealand is worried about the possible costs of its uneasy relationship with the United States, and more particularly about being left behind if Australia and the United States conclude a Free Trade Agreement. The benefits of any such agreement have yet to be seen, but the risk for New Zealand is that exclusion for any length of time might see investment and enterprises shift across the Tasman. The US Administration has been distinctly cool about including New Zealand—hence the helpfulness about American concerns in the Middle East.

All this defence activity is more than a number of Washington's allies feel obliged to do. New Zealand feels it must try harder for it famously is not an ally. You might think that the easiest and most sensible way out of New Zealand's difficulty would be to drop the ban on American naval visits and resume its place in the alliance. After all, the original causes of the dispute have disappeared. There are no nuclear weapons on American surface vessels, and nuclear propulsion (which a

New Zealand Royal Commission found to be safer than Auckland Hospital) has gone from those which make port visits. There seems to be no reason why New Zealand could not make the necessary changes to its anti-nuclear legislation and see its nagging worries about Washington disappear.

At present, though, this is not possible. There are substantial political obstacles to rejoining ANZUS, so substantial that even the conservative National Party is cautious about embracing a change. There is a formidable weight of inertia to be overcome. Just as most of the electorate would have preferred to stay in ANZUS at the time of the break, now most do not care much about rejoining it. The policymakers may worry about trade but the voters see no pressing reason to change. It might take something more dramatic than argument to overcome this inertia.

Certainly, any move to change would bring out the anti-American Left, which is now well-represented in Government. Anti-Americanism in its present form in New Zealand goes back to the protests against the Vietnam War. It was lobbying by the Left, organised by current Prime Minister Helen Clark, then a backbencher, which led the Lange Government to reject the American offer of a visit by the aged and conventionally-powered destroyer Buchanan in January 1985. Their insistence that even 'nuclear-capable' ships should be excluded locked out the American and British navies and made continuance in ANZUS impossible. It made David Lange a hero of the anti-Americans, praised in Moscow (the Foreign Ministry had to ask the Soviets to contain their glee) and lauded by none other than Kim Philby as the world leader he most admired.¹

A decade of conservative government did not depart from this wariness of the United States, though there was a progressive warming in relations. The Left's dislike, however, did not fade. As soon as she came into office in 1999, Helen Clark withdrew the frigate serving with the US Navy in the Gulf, cancelled a favourable lease for 28 F16 aircraft and then abolished New Zealand's combat airforce. None of this was likely to warm relations with Washington, but some unwise remarks about President Bush during the Iraq war revealed an instinctive anti-Americanism which put them on ice.

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There is, however, more than this to New Zealand's reluctance to be an ally. The ANZUS issue quickly became entangled in the rise of Kiwi nationalism. A clever psychologist argued, only half in jest, that the nature of Australian and New Zealand nationalism was different. Australia cut its nationalist teeth on the perennially edgy relationship with Britain and has no trouble in working with the United States. New Zealand, which never exchanged a cross word with the Mother Country, had to assert its adulthood by quarrelling with Uncle Sam. A prominent academic went so far as to call the ANZUS break New Zealand's 'Declaration of Independence', and regular calls for 'an independent foreign policy' are shorthand for a continuing distrust of American (and Australian) intentions. If you ask one of our senior Ministers today why we still maintain the ban on ship visits, he will say simply that it is 'iconic'.

The fact is that the Anzac partners have always had differing emotions about allying with the United States. After the disaster of Singapore, Australia instinctively grasped that the future lay with the United States and worked untiringly for what became the ANZUS Treaty. New Zealand, though, continued even after the war to cherish hopes of 'Imperial defence' led by Britain and it was not until Vietnam that the American alliance became visible to the public. So when the pressure sparked by the anti-war movement built up, New Zealand's attachment to ANZUS turned out to be shallower than that across the Tasman.

There is paradox here. For though opposition to ANZUS is seen by many as a badge of New Zealand's independence and national identity, and despite the protestations of David Lange and others, New Zealand has never ceased to be defended by ANZUS and its nuclear deterrent. New Zealanders themselves agree that the defence of Australia and New Zealand is inseparable. At a poll taken in 1999, 89% of those polled agreed that a threat to one would be seen as a threat to the other. Any threat to Australia or New Zealand would therefore bring in the United States—a point made clear by Washington in 1969 when Secretary of State Rogers stated publicly that any attack on Anzac forces would bring American support. So ANZUS remains firmly tied to New Zealand's tail,

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They also succeeded in complicating New Zealand's relations with Australia. Canberra may have had mixed feelings about the dispute. On the one hand, it gave Australia the close bilateral relationship with the United States that it had always wanted—without the irritation of having to share it with the smaller partner. On the other hand, it imposed new burdens, having to manage two now-separate alliances, two sets of defence exercises and two kinds of intelligence exchanges. But Wellington found that falling out with the United States increased its dependence on Australia. Before that it had some ability to manoeuvre between its two partners, but the move towards greater independence left it much more reliant on Australian goodwill. Sitting on a two-legged stool proved rather less comfortable than a three-legged one.

One thing has become clear over the long years of the dispute: New Zealand cannot function externally without a comfortable relationship with the United States. Despite regular calls over the past 18 years to 'put the issue behind us', every time New Zealand rounds a corner there it is in the way again.

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surprising. What is odd is that the United States should continue to care about it. At the height of the ANZUS row the then American Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger said that the Administration had lost New Zealand's address. This aroused the ire of leader- and letter-writers in New Zealand, but once the risk of Japan and others being contaminated by the 'New Zealand infection' had faded, there was no reason why New Zealand should figure noticeably in America's address book. As an island nation remote from the world's troubles, of no strategic significance ('a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica') and with only a minute part of international trade, there is little to distinguish New Zealand from a score of other small countries.

It is therefore worth asking (though few New Zealanders have) why the United States has not lost the address, why it has persistently hoped that the relationship could be repaired. The simplest answer may be that of a marriage break-up where the couple have accumulated too much in common over the years. The two countries may be divorced, but they are still stuck with one another. It is not that they are both Pacific nations, or that they have fought together in all the wars of the last century. It is that they speak English and their societies, however disparate in size and wealth, have more in common with each other in institutions, politics, law and outlook, than either has with most other countries.

In the strange way that history has, Winston Churchill's union of the English-speaking peoples is turning up again, though in a looser and more informal way than he had hoped. It turns up in the preference of successive British governments

to be a partner of the United States rather than of the European Union; in peacekeeping operations, where some mixture of the US, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand is invariably among the principal contributors; most of all in the books, films, television programmes and academic links which rotate around the Anglosphere.

If the English-speaking countries are in practice drawing closer, then New Zealand cannot be left out—its address is there for everyone in Washington to see, written in English. This means that, whatever the surges of nationalism or anti-Americanism, the pressure on New Zealand to normalise the relationship will not go away. In theory, a closer and more stable friendship does not entail rejoining ANZUS. In practice it probably does. Significant progress towards a comfortable relationship would inevitably raise the issue of the alliance, and if the answer was still no, then clearly the relationship would not be truly comfortable.

New Zealand's relationship with the United States remains unfinished business and will continue to bother its political leaders. In the meantime, however, rejoining ANZUS faces formidable barriers of national pride and a growing nervousness about American power. Ordinary Kiwis feel that since the sky did not fall when New Zealand left the alliance there is little reason to worry about it now, and rejoining might involve burdensome military obligations. Some observers believe that it will take some shift in the external framework—less euphemistically called a fright—to put the alliance back on the political agenda. That would be the least dignified and desirable path. How and when New Zealand may rejoin ANZUS is anybody's guess, but a safer guess is that it will not be soon.

Endnotes

- ¹ Philby said it was because 'He had the courage to ban nuclear ships from New Zealand waters. Now we have no reason to target New Zealand with our intercontinental missiles and indeed we have ceased to do so. I'm sorry we cannot say the same about Australia'. Quoted in Phillip Knightley, *Philby: KGB Masterspy* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1988).