

ERIC
MARGOLIS



New Zealand's no-nukes policy

New Zealand is not a nation with many problems. Sheep vastly outnumber its 3.3 million prosperous people. Exports of lamb, butter, wool and kiwi fruit continue strong. Aside from nagging inflation, the worst problem to date has been the collapse of the export market for green-lipped mussels.

How does an opposition party find election issues in this kind of dulcet climate? New Zealand's leftist Labor party hit on a solution: Make nuclear weapons a key campaign issue. Results were spectacular. David Lange and his Labor party swept into office last July.

Lange vowed that visits to New Zealand by U.S. warships carrying nuclear arms would be forbidden. This threat was not as idle as it sounded: New Zealand has been joined to the U.S. and Australia in the 34-year-old ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) mutual defence pact. Now, one of the pact's members was telling the other to keep away.

The South Pacific is hardly an area of big power crisis. The islands of Australia and New Zealand are today threatened by no one. Yet their people also recall that Japan came very close to invading Australia in early 1942. Only U.S. air and naval forces stopped the Japanese at the battle of the Coral Sea.

As a result, New Zealand and Australia joined the ANZUS pact that put them under the strategic protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. In effect, the U.S. assumed the defence of the two Anglo-Saxon islands.

U.S. protection allowed Australia and New Zealand to spend only a pittance on defence and a great deal on social welfare — just as in the case of Canada. New Zealand, for example, has total armed forces of 12,692 to protect an area the size of Great Britain.

Two weeks ago, shortly before the beginning of ANZUS joint naval exercises, Prime Minister Lange made good on his vow by refusing docking rights to U.S. ships carrying nuclear devices. Washington reacted with outrage, pulled out of the exercises and went so far as to threaten New Zealand with cuts in U.S. imports of its butter and wool.

At first view, Washington's furious reaction seemed a curious response to what appeared a tempest in a teapot. Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, visiting in Washington, tried unsuccessfully to reconcile the two allies. But the Reagan administration would not relent. Why?

For very good, if unstated, reasons. The U.S. is now embarked on a major program to arm its warships with the new Tomahawk nuclear sea-launched cruise missile. The BGM-109A has a range of 1,500 miles, carries a small nuclear warhead in the 250-kiloton range and, thanks to its onboard radar, is accurate enough to hit a one-storey house from 1,500 miles away.

Until last year the U.S. had only 15 aircraft carriers on which to rely for tactical nuclear strike capability. Targeting these huge ships is, for the Russians, an easy matter. One American admiral recently estimated that, should war erupt, "our carriers would last 15 minutes."

Now, thanks to the Tomahawk — which is essentially the same missile as used by the U.S. in the ground-launched role in Europe — the U.S. Navy will be able to turn 140 surface ships and submarines into tactical nuclear strike platforms. This means that Russia will have great difficulty targeting so many ships and equal problems in defending against deadly accurate, low-flying, naval cruise missiles.

NDP readers please note: Before you rush out to picket the U.S. Embassy for another example of warmongering, Russia has had nuclear cruise missiles aboard warships since the 1960s.

Back to pesky New Zealand. If other members of the Western Alliance follow Lange's lead and use shipborn nuclear weapons as an issue to get votes, U.S. plans to deploy the naval Tomahawk will be in trouble. Warships on long-range patrols must dock to take on water, food and to give crews a rest. Naval visits are an essential part of alliance strength and psychology.

Besides cruise missiles, many U.S. warships (and Russian) carry nuclear-armed depth charges, torpedoes and anti-aircraft missiles. For example, the Russian Whisky class sub that ran aground in 1983 at Sweden's Karlskrona naval base was carrying nuclear torpedoes designed to destroy harbors.

The U.S. will simply not allow its ships to be inspected to see if they carry nuclear weapons. But this is precisely what may happen if New Zealand's policy spreads — and the first place would be Japan.

Japan's constitution forbids nuclear weapons on its soil. Yet, at the same time, nuclear-armed U.S. air and naval units, based in and around Japan, protect it from Soviet attack. Japan is so weak militarily that it cannot defend itself and chooses to rely on the U.S. — like New Zealand or Canada. "Please defend us," says Japan, "but let's pretend you don't have nuclear arms even though the Russians do."

So far, the Japanese have turned a blind eye to the obvious presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Japan and aboard U.S. carriers. But what if New Zealand's policy is adopted by Japan's nervous politicians? What if Australia and the Philippines do the same?

The result could well be the inability of U.S. air and naval forces to protect the Pacific basin against growing Soviet military power there. That is why Washington is so angry at New Zealand's adolescent behavior.