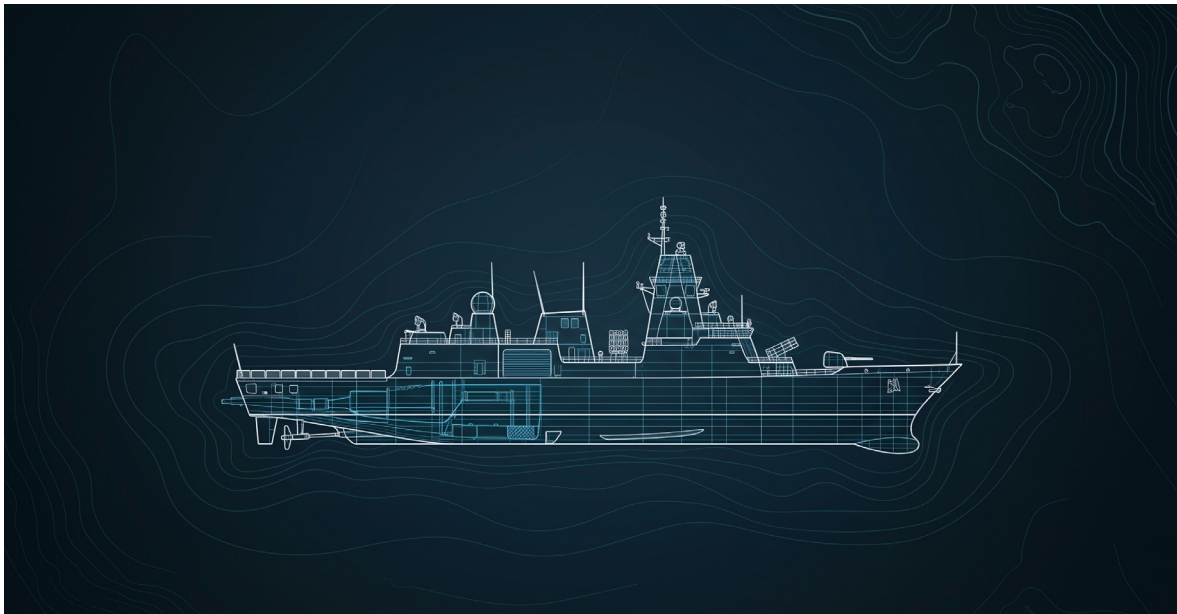


ADRIFT

A TRADING NATION, AN AGEING NAVY AND THE 2027 FRIGATE DECISION

JULY 2026

JOHN HOWARD



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About the New Zealand Initiative

The New Zealand Initiative is an independent public policy think tank supported by chief executives of major New Zealand businesses. We believe in evidence-based policy and are committed to developing policies that work for all New Zealanders.

Our mission is to help build a better, stronger New Zealand. We are taking the initiative to promote a prosperous, free and fair society with a competitive, open and dynamic economy. We develop and contribute bold ideas that will have a profound, positive, long-term impact.

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Foreword

I asked Major General (Retd) John Howard, our Senior Fellow, to write a paper answering a question that sounds almost too simple for a man who spent more than four decades in uniform: what is a frigate?

I asked because my impression is that the basics are poorly understood. Much of the public, and perhaps some of our politicians, would struggle to say what such a ship does, why a small country should own one or why we should pay for it when every defence dollar competes with hospitals, schools and roads.

Those questions can no longer wait. Cabinet must decide by 2027 whether to replace HMNZS Te Kaha and HMNZS Te Mana, and with what. Alongside the 2025 Defence Capability Plan, the Government has committed to lifting defence spending to two percent of GDP within eight years, a level not sustained since the early 1990s. Yet the public debate on this decision has barely begun.

John's answer is larger than the ship. A frigate, he shows, is the instrument through which a maritime trading nation exercises sea power. For a country that sends 99 percent of its trade by volume across the ocean and holds the fourth largest exclusive economic zone in the world, sea power is no abstraction. It is the precondition of our prosperity.

So this paper was never really about buying a warship. It is about what New Zealand wants its Navy, and its wider defence force, to be able to do. Ships, helicopters, drones, docks and the people who operate them form one system, and the debate we need is about capabilities across domains, not hardware in isolation.

Nor is the choice before Cabinet the binary one sometimes presented in budget rounds, defence against health or education. A nation that cannot help secure the sea lanes carrying its export income will eventually find it has less to spend on everything else.

As a German, I have watched my native country demonstrate how not to do it. In June, Berlin cancelled its largest warship programme since 1945, writing off billions after years of gold-plated requirements and bureaucratic drift. New Zealand could never fail on that scale, but neither can it afford to fail at all. As John puts it, capability must arrive at the speed of relevance.

He is also fond of reminding me that "our world is not what you hope it will be". The strategic environment facing New Zealand is more volatile, ambiguous and uncertain than at any point since the Second World War, and hoping otherwise is not a policy.

I thank John for this research note, and I have already asked him for more. His next task is to describe what good would look like if the Minister, the Chief of Defence Force and the Secretary of Defence seize the opportunity the Defence Capability Plan has created, and what it will cost us if they do not.

New Zealand has not debated its defence seriously in decades. This paper is our contribution to that debate, and I invite you to join it.

Dr Oliver Hartwich

Executive Director

The New Zealand Initiative

Abstract

This paper examines three interconnected questions essential to understanding New Zealand's forthcoming frigate replacement decision. First, it defines sea power, the concept first systematised by Alfred Thayer Mahan and subsequently evolved through a century of naval strategic thought. It explains why the control of maritime space remains as decisive in the twenty-first century as it was in the age of sail.

Second, it describes the global commons: those shared domains of sea, air, space, and cyberspace through which the world's trade flows and upon which New Zealand's economic prosperity directly depends. It analyses the extent to which New Zealand's access to these commons is at risk as the Indo-Pacific's strategic environment deteriorates.

Third, it defines the frigate as a class of warship and makes the affirmative case for why New Zealand needs capable successor vessels to its ageing Anzac-class frigates.

The paper concludes that, for a small island trading nation with an outsized maritime estate and deep alliance dependencies, the frigate is not a luxury but a strategic necessity.

1. Introduction

New Zealand is, in the most literal sense, a maritime nation. Its two main islands sit in the South Pacific Ocean, more than 2,000 kilometres from the nearest continent. Its exclusive economic zone, at more than four million square kilometres, is the fourth largest in the world, roughly fifteen times the land area of the country it surrounds.¹ Nearly all of its trade, by volume, moves by sea.

Its constitutional relationships extend to three Pacific territories: the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau. Its security commitments and alliance relationships are founded on the assumption that New Zealand can deploy and sustain naval forces in the waters it calls home.

And yet, for much of the past three decades, New Zealand's defence policy has treated naval capability as a discretionary expense rather than a strategic imperative.

In 2001, the Clark government disbanded the air combat force, retiring the A-4K Skyhawks without replacement, while planned enhancements to the frigates' offensive capability were curtailed or deferred.² The era became a symbol of what critics called 'defence holidays': a deliberate decision to free ride on the alliance guarantees of larger partners while spending the peace dividend on social programmes. The frigates were eventually restored to their combat configuration, but the episode illustrated how easily maritime power can be sacrificed when immediate threats are not visible.

¹ New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Our Maritime Zones and Boundaries', <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/environment/oceans-and-fisheries/our-maritime-zones-and-boundaries>.

² Peter Greener, *Timing is Everything: The Politics and Processes of New Zealand Defence Acquisition Decision Making* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009), ch. 5.

The threats are now visible. China's People's Liberation Army Navy has become the largest in the world by hull count.³ Beijing has signed security agreements with Pacific Island states that sit within New Zealand's sphere of strategic interest. The 2025 Defence Capability Plan, the most significant shift in New Zealand defence policy since the post-Cold War drawdown, has explicitly named China's 'assertive pursuit of its strategic objectives' as the principal driver of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific.⁴

New Zealand's two ANZAC-class frigates, HMNZS Te Kaha and HMNZS Te Mana, will reach the end of their design lives in the mid-2030s. If they are not replaced in time, New Zealand will briefly, and perhaps permanently, lose its only blue-water combat capability.

This paper makes the case that such a loss would be strategically costly in three distinct ways: operationally, because New Zealand would lose its only credible surface combat capability along with the trained crews who operate it; institutionally, because the skills, doctrine and support systems of a combat navy take a generation to rebuild once lost; and diplomatically, because the allies on whom New Zealand's security ultimately depends would draw their own conclusions. It does so by addressing three foundational questions: What is sea power, and why does it matter? What are the global commons, and why does New Zealand's prosperity depend on access to them? What is a frigate, and why does New Zealand need one? The answers to these questions, taken together, make the case for frigate replacement more compelling than any specific platform analysis or procurement budget discussion.

2. Sea Power: Definition, History and Contemporary Relevance

2.1 Mahan and the Classic Formulation

The foundational text of modern naval strategy is Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, published in 1890.⁵ Mahan, an American naval officer and historian, argued that national greatness was inextricably linked to maritime power: the capacity to use the sea for commerce, to control sea lines of communication, and to deny that use to adversaries in time of war.

His thesis was grounded in the study of British naval history: he showed how Britain's dominance of the seas from the seventeenth century onward had translated into economic wealth, colonial empire, and ultimately into the capacity to prosecute and win global wars.

Mahan defined sea power broadly: not just naval forces but the entire system of maritime commerce, shipbuilding capacity, merchant marine, overseas bases, and geographic position that together determined a nation's ability to influence events through maritime means.

His analysis identified six elements as determinative: geographic position, physical conformation (including natural harbours), extent of territory, population size, national character, and the character of the government. A nation favourably endowed in these dimensions (as Britain, and later the United

³ By hull count. The United States retains advantages in tonnage, nuclear propulsion, carrier aviation and global logistics. See U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC, 2024).

⁴ New Zealand Government, *2025 Defence Capability Plan* (Wellington: Ministry of Defence, April 2025).

⁵ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890).

States, were) would naturally tend toward maritime dominance; a nation poorly positioned or lacking these attributes would find sea power difficult to sustain.

Mahan's influence on the naval build-ups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was enormous. The German Kaiser Wilhelm II read the work with enthusiasm. The Japanese navy absorbed its lessons and applied them with devastating effect at Tsushima in 1905. The United States, under Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, used Mahanian principles to justify the construction of a two-ocean navy and the acquisition of Pacific Island bases.

The First and Second World Wars both confirmed the importance of Mahan's central insight: the power that could keep the sea lanes open, and deny them to its enemies, gained a decisive advantage. But both wars also showed that sea power works only as part of a wider system of industrial capacity, fiscal endurance, intelligence and alliances.

Mahan is a starting point, not a procurement manual. His six elements of sea power do not translate automatically into an acquisition case for a small, fiscally constrained democracy. For New Zealand, the relevant question is never how to command the sea; it is how to contribute usefully to sea control, maritime domain awareness and deterrence in coalition with others. That distinction runs through the rest of this paper.

2.2 Sea Power in the Nuclear and Post-Cold War Era

The advent of nuclear weapons created a new dimension of deterrence that operated outside the traditional Mahanian framework, but it did not make sea power obsolete. Rather, it embedded the sea into nuclear deterrence itself: ballistic missile submarines became the most survivable leg of the nuclear triad. The ability to track, locate and, if necessary, destroy enemy submarines became one of the most important missions in naval warfare.

Anti-submarine warfare, the hunt for submarines in the deep ocean, became a defining competency of Western navies during the Cold War and remains central to naval capability today – hence the NZ investment in the P8 Poseidon.

The post-Cold War era brought a different challenge to the Mahanian framework: the apparent absence of a peer naval competitor. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States Navy operated in conditions of near-absolute maritime supremacy. The critical importance of sea control, the core of Mahan's thesis, became invisible precisely because it was so thoroughly assured.

Western navies, including New Zealand's, reduced investment in blue-water combat capability and pivoted toward constabulary and expeditionary roles: counter-piracy, humanitarian response, and the projection of land power ashore in permissive environments.

That era of maritime supremacy is now ending. China's naval expansion represents the most significant challenge to American sea control since the Soviet Union, and in some respects a more severe one. The PLAN has been built, and is being built, specifically to contest US power projection in the Western Pacific.

It incorporates anti-ship ballistic missiles, quiet diesel-electric submarines, and a large surface combatant fleet designed to operate inside what Chinese strategists call the 'first island chain': the arc of islands from Japan through the Philippines and down to Borneo within which Chinese planners aim to achieve local sea control in a conflict.

Of even greater concern was Beijing's clear demonstration of strategic military capability, intention and perhaps will. On 6 July 2026, China conducted its first publicly acknowledged test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) into the Pacific, firing a nuclear-capable JL-2 from the South China Sea into international waters between Nauru and Tonga. The missile carried a dummy warhead, but the message needed no explosives: it landed within the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone established by the Treaty of Rarotonga, and very close to home for New Zealand.⁶

2.3 The Components of Modern Sea Power

Contemporary naval strategists, building on Mahan's foundation, identify sea power as comprising several interconnected capabilities. Sea control, the ability to use a given maritime area for one's own purposes while denying its use to an adversary, remains the foundational concept. Power projection is the ability to strike targets ashore from the sea, or to land and sustain forces. It extends the relevance of sea power inland.

Maritime security encompasses the constabulary and governance functions of navies: counter-piracy, border enforcement, fisheries patrol, and the interdiction of smuggling.

Modern sea power also requires presence. The mere deployment of a capable warship into a contested or sensitive maritime zone sends a signal about national will and capability that no diplomatic note or trade agreement can replicate.

When the Royal New Zealand Navy deploys a frigate to a multinational exercise in the South China Sea or sends it to lead the response to a Pacific cyclone, it is exercising sea power in Mahan's sense. It demonstrates the capacity and willingness to use the sea for national purposes and to contribute to the collective management of the maritime commons.

For a small nation like New Zealand, sea power means something more modest than fleet supremacy or global reach: the ability to exercise meaningful influence in one's own maritime domain, to contribute credibly to the collective security architecture that maintains the broader maritime order, and to deploy capable forces when the nation's interests or obligations demand it. A frigate is the very minimum platform through which these objectives can be achieved.

3. The Global Commons and New Zealand's Trade Dependence

3.1 Defining the Global Commons

The 'global commons' is a term used in strategic studies to describe the domains that no single nation owns but that all nations require access to if they are to function in the modern world.

The concept is usually taken to encompass four domains: the maritime commons (the high seas and international straits through which seaborne trade flows); the aerial commons (the international airspace above the high seas through which civil aviation operates); the space commons (the orbital

⁶ 'China Conducts Rare Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile Test, Angering Pacific Neighbors', CNN, 6 July 2026; 'China Tests Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile, Kicks Off Annual Exercise with Russia', USNI News, 6 July 2026. On the impact zone within the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, see 'China Test-Launches a Ballistic Missile in the South Pacific', NPR, 7 July 2026.

environment in which satellite systems operate); and the cyber commons (the global internet and the underlying infrastructure it depends upon).

Of these four, the maritime commons are the most ancient and, in terms of physical trade volumes, the most important. The high seas have been treated as a shared resource (*res communis*, in the Latin legal tradition) since at least the seventeenth century, when the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius articulated the principle of *mare liberum*: the free sea, open to all for navigation and commerce.

The modern legal framework for maritime commons access is embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which entered into force in 1994 and has been ratified by most of the world's trading nations, including New Zealand. UNCLOS establishes the right of innocent passage through territorial seas, freedom of navigation and overflight on the high seas, and the right of transit passage through international straits.

Freedom of navigation is more than a legal formality: it is the practical foundation on which the entire global trading system rests. The world's container ships, bulk carriers, and oil tankers move through a relatively small number of chokepoints (the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Taiwan Strait among the most critical). Their closure or disruption would immediately and severely disrupt global commerce.

Recent disruptions to global shipping, from Houthi attacks in the Red Sea to drought restrictions in the Panama Canal, have imposed real costs on New Zealand even though they occurred far from its shores. These chokepoints are not threatened by nature alone; they are increasingly contested by states that seek to exercise political leverage through maritime geography.

3.2 New Zealand's Extraordinary Trade Dependence

For New Zealand, access to the maritime commons is not an abstract strategic interest; it is the material precondition for the country's prosperity. Approximately 99% of New Zealand's international trade by volume moves by sea.⁷ The country exports dairy products, meat, timber, wool, horticulture, and a range of manufactured goods; it imports fuel, vehicles, machinery, electronics, and consumer goods.

All this flows through a series of shipping lanes that connect New Zealand's ports (Auckland, Tauranga, Lyttelton, Port Chalmers) to the ports of Asia, Australia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas.

The numbers are stark. New Zealand's total goods exports in 2024 were worth approximately NZ\$71 billion, with China receiving roughly a quarter of that total, followed by the United States and Australia at around 12–13% each.⁸ New Zealand's top export, dairy products, is almost entirely destined for Asian markets, predominantly China. A disruption to the shipping lanes between New Zealand and the Western Pacific (through conflict, political coercion, or the imposition of a naval blockade) would not be merely inconvenient. It would be economically catastrophic.

New Zealand's energy security is equally dependent on open sea lanes. Since the conversion of the Marsden Point refinery to an import-only terminal in 2022, the country imports virtually all its refined

⁷ World Trade Organization, *Trade Policy Review: New Zealand*, Report by the Secretariat (Geneva: WTO, 2009).

⁸ Stats NZ, 'Overseas Merchandise Trade: December 2024' (Wellington, 2025); Victoria University of Wellington, 'NZ Should Be Worried about China's Trade Statistics', February 2025.

fuel requirements, which arrive by tanker.⁹ The disruption of petroleum shipments, even for a matter of weeks, would bring New Zealand's transport, agricultural, and industrial sectors to a halt. The fuel reserves that New Zealand is obliged to maintain under its International Energy Agency commitments provide only a temporary buffer against a sustained maritime disruption, particularly as part of New Zealand's stockholding obligation is held as contracted 'tickets' for stock stored offshore, which must itself be shipped here in a crisis.¹⁰

3.3 The Threat to the Maritime Commons

The maritime commons are under pressure from several directions simultaneously. The most significant long-term threat is the Chinese challenge to the existing rules-based maritime order. China's claims in the South China Sea represent a direct challenge to the freedom of navigation principles that underpin global trade. The so-called 'nine-dash line' has been used to assert Chinese historic rights and jurisdiction over most of that sea, overlapping maritime entitlements that UNCLOS allocates to Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. The South China Sea carried an estimated US\$3.4 trillion in trade in 2016, roughly one fifth of global trade that year, and remains the route through which much of the commodity trade between East Asia and Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia flows.¹¹

China has built artificial islands, installed military facilities, and deployed coast guard and 'maritime militia' vessels throughout the South China Sea to press its claims. The 2016 award of an arbitral tribunal constituted under UNCLOS, which rejected China's historic-rights claims within the nine-dash line, was dismissed by Beijing as 'null and void.'¹²

For New Zealand specifically, the threat to the maritime commons extends into the South Pacific itself. Chinese fishing fleets (distant-water fishing vessels that operate in the exclusive economic zones of Pacific Island states, often without authorisation) have been a persistent source of tension in the region. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing depletes fish stocks that Pacific Island communities depend on for food security and economic livelihoods.¹³

Beyond fishing, China's growing diplomatic and economic presence in the Pacific (and its 2022 security agreement with the Solomon Islands) raises questions about the long-term orientation of Pacific Island states and their willingness to host Chinese naval infrastructure.¹⁴ The response is already visible: on 6 July 2026, Australia and Fiji signed the Ocean of Peace Alliance, Fiji's first mutual defence treaty, a development that will be of real concern to Beijing.¹⁵

⁹ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 'About Our Fuel System', <https://www.mbie.govt.nz>.

¹⁰ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 'New Zealand's Participation in the International Energy Programme', <https://www.mbie.govt.nz>.

¹¹ CSIS ChinaPower Project, 'How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?' (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies), estimating US\$3.4 trillion in 2016.

¹² Permanent Court of Arbitration, *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)*, Award of 12 July 2016.

¹³ 'Approaches to Combatting Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing', *Nature Food* 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-020-0121-y>.

¹⁴ 'China and Solomon Islands Sign Security Deal, over U.S., Australia Alarm', *Washington Post*, 20 April 2022.

¹⁵ 'Australia, Fiji Seal New Mutual Defense Pact in Push to Counter China in the Pacific', Associated Press, 6 July 2026.

The broader pattern is one of incremental pressure on the rules-based maritime order. China does not need to fire a shot to change the strategic balance in the Pacific. By building influence, establishing footholds, and demonstrating that it is willing to act assertively while the established powers hesitate, it shifts the calculation for smaller states about where their security interests lie. The geopolitical environment changed on the 6th of July, and not for the better.

New Zealand's response to this challenge must include the visible, credible deployment of maritime power in its own region, not as a confrontational gesture, but as a signal that the rules-based order in the South Pacific has capable defenders.

3.4 New Zealand's EEZ: A Maritime Estate Without a Guardian

New Zealand's exclusive economic zone is the fourth largest in the world, covering more than four million square kilometres and encompassing the Chatham Rise, the Campbell Plateau, and waters as far south as the Sub-Antarctic Islands. This maritime estate contains valuable fisheries, seabed minerals and environmental assets, and it attracts growing commercial and strategic interest from others. The EEZ grants New Zealand sovereign rights over the living and non-living resources of the water column and seabed within its bounds: fisheries, mineral resources, and the potential for deep-sea mining.

It also imposes obligations: New Zealand is responsible for search and rescue coordination across a vast area of the Southern Ocean, one of the most remote and hostile maritime environments on earth.

New Zealand's maritime estate is, in practical terms, only lightly governed. The RNZN and New Zealand Customs Service together lack the vessel capacity to conduct regular, credible patrols across the entire EEZ. The 2025 Defence Capability Plan commits the NZDF to maintaining 'persistent awareness of New Zealand's EEZ, the South Pacific, the Southern Ocean and the Ross Dependency', an acknowledgement that such awareness cannot currently be taken for granted.¹⁶

This gap is a sovereign vulnerability and a strategic risk, not just a management inconvenience. A state that cannot monitor or police its own EEZ is one whose sovereign rights can be eroded by states and non-state actors willing to operate in the dark.

Table 1: New Zealand's Key Maritime Statistics

Indicator	Figure	Context
EEZ Size	~4.1 million km ²	4th largest in the world; ~15× land area
Extended Continental Shelf	~1.7 million km ²	Additional seabed rights beyond EEZ
Trade by Sea (by volume)	~99%	Near-total dependence on maritime routes
Largest Export Market	China (~25%)	Primarily dairy and meat products
ANZAC Frigate Commissionings	1997 / 1999	Both now approaching 30 years of service
Frigate End of Design Life	Mid-2030s	Firm outer deadline without replacement

¹⁶ New Zealand Government, *2025 Defence Capability Plan*, 'Maintain Persistent Situational Awareness in Our EEZ, the South Pacific and Southern Ocean'.

4. What Is a Frigate?

4.1 *The Frigate in Naval History*

The word 'frigate' has been part of naval vocabulary for nearly five centuries, but its meaning has evolved considerably. In the age of sail, a frigate was a fast, single-deck warship carrying 28 to 44 guns, smaller than a ship-of-the-line (the capital ship of its era), but faster and more manoeuvrable. Frigates were the workhorses of the sailing navy: they scouted for the fleet, escorted merchant convoys, carried dispatches, blockaded enemy ports, and raided enemy commerce.

They were the ships most often detached for independent operations far from the main battle fleet. That required their commanding officers (young men of drive and ambition, in the Napoleonic era) to exercise judgement and initiative without the benefit of orders from a superior. The frigate captains of the Age of Nelson were the special forces of their day.

The steam era transformed the frigate, as it transformed all warships. By the late nineteenth century, the category had been absorbed into the general taxonomy of cruisers and torpedo boats, and the term fell out of formal use for several decades.

It re-emerged during the Second World War, when the Royal Navy began using 'frigate' to describe a new class of anti-submarine escort vessels designed to protect Atlantic convoys from German U-boat attack. These ships, successors to the smaller and less seaworthy corvettes of the early war years, were larger and better armed, capable of sustained ocean operations, and equipped with the ASDIC sonar that allowed them to hunt submarines below the surface.

The post-war frigates of the Cold War era evolved into the multi-role surface combatants that bear the name today. The modern frigate is a medium-sized ocean-going warship, typically displacing between 3,500 and 8,000 tonnes, capable of operating independently or as part of a task group. It is equipped to perform a broad range of missions: anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, anti-air warfare, and, in the most capable variants, strike against land targets.

It is neither as large nor as heavily armed as a destroyer or cruiser, but it is far more capable than a patrol vessel or offshore patrol ship. In the hierarchy of modern warships, it sits in the middle: a true blue-water combat platform, but one designed for versatility and sustained deployment rather than for the highest-end threat environments.

The Competing Demands on a Warship

Decisions on major warship investments, with their large capital and operating commitments, are rarely clear cut, even for larger nations. In addition, there will be substantial political tension and intrigue at the Cabinet table leading up to the decision.

Ken Booth's triangle of naval functions, military, diplomatic and constabulary, remains the clearest lens through which to view the competing demands placed on any warship deployed in defence of the national interest. The picture below illustrates it.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).



4.2 The Modern Frigate's Capabilities

A contemporary frigate's mission set is extraordinarily broad. In the anti-submarine warfare role, historically the frigate's core function, it employs a combination of hull-mounted sonar, towed-array sonar, variable-depth sonar, and embarked maritime helicopters equipped with dipping sonar and lightweight torpedoes to detect, classify, localise, and attack submarines.

Modern submarines are very quiet, and the detection problem is difficult; the advantage shifts between attacker and defender with technological advances in quietening and sensor processing. But the frigate remains the primary platform through which surface navies prosecute the submarine threat.

In the anti-surface warfare role, the frigate uses its radar, electronic intelligence systems, and datalinks to detect and track surface contacts, and can engage them with missiles, gun systems, and in some configurations, anti-ship missiles of considerable range and lethality.

In the anti-air warfare role, a modern frigate equipped with vertical-launch missiles and a phased-array radar can engage aircraft, cruise missiles, and even ballistic missiles, providing an air defence umbrella not only for itself but for other ships in company. This last capability, area air defence, transforms a frigate from a self-defending single unit into an asset capable of protecting an entire task group.

Beyond these combat functions, the modern frigate's size and endurance give it capabilities that smaller vessels cannot replicate. It can sustain high speeds in heavy weather, which is critically important in the Southern Ocean, where patrol vessels are often unable to operate safely at all. It can

carry one or two maritime helicopters, which multiply the ship's reach enormously: a helicopter can search an area in an hour that would take a ship a day to cover. It can also deliver personnel, equipment, supplies, or medical assistance to locations the ship itself cannot reach.

It has crew accommodation and medical facilities to support sustained deployments of weeks or months. It has the fuel and stores capacity to remain at sea for extended periods without replenishment. And it has the command and communication infrastructure (secure satellite communications, datalinks, encrypted voice) to serve as the command platform for a task group or joint operation.

4.3 The Frigate vs. the Patrol Vessel: A Critical Distinction

The most common misunderstanding in public debate about New Zealand's naval requirements is the assumption that offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) could substitute for frigates in some or all their roles. OPVs are cheaper, less capable ships used for fisheries patrol, border enforcement and humanitarian response. This misunderstanding is worth addressing directly, because it recurs in every defence budget cycle.

An OPV is a lightly armed, relatively slow ship designed for constabulary operations in relatively benign sea states. It can intercept and board a fishing vessel. It can deliver aid after a Pacific cyclone. It can carry out search and rescue in coastal or sheltered waters.

What it cannot do is operate effectively in heavy weather at sea; sustain demanding deployments in remote southern waters; embark and operate large maritime helicopters; detect and attack submarines; defend itself or others against air and missile attack; or contribute meaningfully to a coalition maritime operation in a contested environment.

The distinction matters because the same ship that needs to respond to a Pacific cyclone also needs, occasionally, to operate in a task group with the Royal Australian Navy, the US Navy or the Royal Navy. In that environment the threat includes adversary submarines and anti-ship missiles. A frigate can contribute across that whole spectrum. An OPV cannot.

New Zealand's procurement history has sometimes obscured this distinction by acquiring OPVs that look naval (they wear grey paint and fly the White Ensign) but that are fundamentally incapable of the missions that define a serious naval contribution to collective maritime security.

CAPABILITY	OFFSHORE PATROL VESSEL (OPV) 	FRIGATE 
Constabulary & Fisheries Patrol	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
Heavy Weather Southern Ocean Ops	✗ Fail (Structurally incapable)	✓ Yes
Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW)	✗ Fail	✓ Yes (Integrated Sonar Suite)
Area Air/Missile Defense (AAW)	✗ Fail	✓ Yes (VLS Cells)
Coalition Task Group Integration	✗ Fail (Lacks survivability)	✓ Yes

4.4 The Embarked Helicopter: A Force Multiplier

No component of the modern frigate's capability is more important, or more often underappreciated, than the embarked maritime helicopter. A frigate operating without a helicopter is like an army without reconnaissance: it knows what it can see from its own bridge, and no more.

A frigate with a helicopter embarked can search an area of hundreds of square kilometres in hours, identify and classify surface and subsurface contacts at stand-off range, deliver personnel and supplies across distances that would take the ship itself hours to cover. It can also provide a combat search-and-rescue capability that can mean the difference between life and death in a maritime emergency.

New Zealand moved to secure this capability in August 2025, announcing that it would begin negotiations to acquire five MH-60R Seahawk maritime helicopters, among the most capable maritime helicopters in current production, through the United States Foreign Military Sales programme, with more than NZ\$2 billion budgeted and final decisions due in 2026.¹⁸ The MH-60R is equipped with a dipping sonar, sonobuoy dispensers, torpedoes, and a surface search radar capable of detecting small targets in high sea states. It is the helicopter that Australia, the United States, Denmark, Saudi Arabia, and India have all selected for their naval aviation requirements.

Without capable frigate platforms to operate from, however, this investment is partially wasted. The Seahawks need ships from which to deploy, and those ships need the seakeeping, flight deck size, aviation fuel stowage, and maintenance facilities that only a frigate, not an OPV, can provide.

5. Why New Zealand Needs a Frigate

5.1 The Ageing Fleet Problem

HMNZS Te Kaha was commissioned on 22 July 1997 and HMNZS Te Mana on 10 December 1999. Both ships are approaching three decades in service.¹⁹ The 2025 Defence Capability Plan states plainly that 'most of the current ships in the Royal New Zealand Navy fleet will reach the end of their intended design life by the mid-2030s', the Anzac-class frigates among them.²⁰

The Defence Capability Plan allocates an indicative NZ\$300–600 million to sustaining the two ships into the early 2030s.²¹ This is a necessary investment, but one that buys time for replacement procurement rather than a long-term solution. Ships, unlike fine whisky, do not improve with age: maintenance costs rise exponentially as hulls and systems age, unplanned defects become more frequent, and the supply chain for spare parts thins as original manufacturers discontinue legacy components.

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence, 'Maritime Helicopter Replacement', <https://www.defence.govt.nz/our-work/equip/capability-projects/maritime-helicopter-replacement/>. The proposed Foreign Military Sale received US approval in 2026: 'NZ's \$2.6 Billion Military Helicopter Purchase Approved by US', RNZ.

¹⁹ New Zealand Defence Force, 'HMNZS Te Kaha' and 'HMNZS Te Mana', <https://www.nzdf.mil.nz>.

²⁰ New Zealand Government, *2025 Defence Capability Plan*, 25.

²¹ New Zealand Government, *2025 Defence Capability Plan*, Frigate Sustainment Programme (indicative cost NZ\$300–600 million); Ministry of Defence, 'Frigate Sustainment Programme', <https://www.defence.govt.nz>.

The operational consequences of the frigates' age are already visible. New Zealand's participation in multinational exercises has reportedly been constrained by vessel availability. A navy that can rarely deploy its one available frigate loses credibility with allies and adversaries alike.

The problem is structural, not incidental: with only two hulls, any time one is in planned maintenance (which in an ageing ship can occupy six to twelve months out of every two or three years), only one is available. And when unplanned defects arise in that one, New Zealand's surface combat capability falls to zero. The lesson here is that two ships alone is not a capability no matter how you try and sell it.

5.2 The Strategic Environment Demands Action

The strategic case for frigate replacement rests on a simple proposition: the maritime environment in which New Zealand's frigates will operate in the 2030s and 2040s will be more dangerous than at any time since the Second World War. The current ships will be unable to meet it. New Zealand's own intelligence community has described the Indo-Pacific as a 'focal point for geostrategic competition' and identified China as a 'particularly assertive and powerful actor.'

The 2025 Defence Capability Plan names China's 'assertive pursuit of its strategic objectives' as the principal driver of strategic competition in the region. Recent events only served to reinforce this strategic assessment.

This is not primarily about New Zealand going to war with China; it is about deterrence and credible presence. For a small state, deterrence is never a solo act: a single New Zealand frigate deters nothing on its own, but it adds real weight and legitimacy to the coalition operations through which the maritime order is actually policed. The value of a capable warship is not only what it can do in a conflict; it is the signal it sends about a nation's willingness and ability to defend its interests and honour its commitments.

A New Zealand that can deploy a modern frigate with a 32-cell vertical launch system, a capable naval gun, an integrated sonar suite, and a Seahawk helicopter sends one message to the region and its allies. A New Zealand operating aged ships that cannot reliably leave port sends quite another. Nations, like individuals, are judged by what they can do, not only by what they say.

5.3 Alliance Obligations

New Zealand's security ultimately rests on its alliance relationships: with Australia above all, but also with the United States, the United Kingdom, and the broader network of Five Eyes and partner nations. These relationships are not unconditional. They are built on the expectation of reciprocal contribution. New Zealand is expected to bring capable forces to joint operations, share the burden of regional security and not simply rely on larger allies to do the hard work while contributing token presence and diplomatic support.

The most consequential alliance development for New Zealand's frigate decision is Australia's August 2025 selection of the Upgraded Mogami-class frigate as the replacement for its own ANZAC frigates under the SEA 3000 programme.²² If New Zealand selects the same platform, as the Ministry of

²² Australian Government Department of Defence, 'Mogami-Class Frigate Selected for the Navy's New General Purpose Frigates', media release, 5 August 2025.

Defence appears to be seriously considering, the two navies would share doctrine, platforms, logistics, maintenance facilities, training pipelines, and spare parts.

The interoperability dividend of operating the same frigates as the Royal Australian Navy cannot be overstated. It would transform the New Zealand and Australian navies from merely compatible partners into a genuinely integrated maritime force, able to conduct joint operations at a level neither navy has achieved before. It is also worth considering which regional partners might also select such an option, which would better enable regional coalitions.

The alternative of allowing New Zealand's frigate capability to lapse would do more than inconvenience the alliance: it would change New Zealand's status within it. It would go from a small but credible partner that brings genuine capability to the table to a 'freeloader', the word the US Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, chose at the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2026 when he declared that '2 percent is freeloading', a partner whose contribution is limited at best to diplomatic support, intelligence sharing, and the occasional patrol vessel.²³

Australia and the United States have made no secret of their expectation that New Zealand will maintain combat-capable naval forces. The Government's commitment, made alongside the 2025 Defence Capability Plan, to lift defence spending to 2% of GDP within eight years is a recognition, by the New Zealand government, that this expectation must be met.²⁴

5.4 The Pacific Dimension

New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific Islands is constitutional, historical and deeply human as much as it is strategic. The Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau are in free association or union with New Zealand; their citizens hold New Zealand passports. New Zealand has long-standing obligations to the broader Pacific Island Forum family and is expected, by Pacific peoples as much as by its wider allies, to provide leadership and material support when crises arise.

These crises come in predictable forms: cyclones, volcanic eruptions, coups, maritime emergencies. They also come, increasingly, in the form of governance pressure from outside the region: the slow erosion of Pacific Island autonomy through debt diplomacy, security agreements, and economic dependence that benefit external powers at the expense of Pacific communities.

A frigate is one of New Zealand's most important instruments for responding to these challenges, alongside diplomacy, aid, air surveillance and patrol capability, and for the hardest cases it is the only one that will do. When Tropical Cyclone Harold devastated Vanuatu in 2020, or when the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted in January 2022, New Zealand's response capacity was directly constrained by the availability and capability of its naval vessels.

A modern frigate, with its helicopter, its medical facilities, its stores capacity, and its ability to operate in the heavy swells of the South Pacific, is the platform through which New Zealand projects humanitarian power and demonstrates its Pacific commitment. No diplomatic statement or aid cheque can replicate it.

²³ 'The Hegseth Shock for New Zealand', *Foreign Policy*, 11 June 2026; 'Pete Hegseth's "Freeloading" Snipe: Should NZ Be Worried?', RNZ, June 2026.

²⁴ Ministry of Defence, 'Defence Capability Plan Released', 7 April 2025, <https://www.defence.govt.nz/news/defence-capability-plan-released/>.

At the same time, New Zealand's Pacific role now has a security dimension that it did not have a decade ago. China's growing presence in the Pacific (its diplomatic investments, its infrastructure financing, its fishing fleets, and its 2022 security agreement with the Solomon Islands) has brought great-power competition into what was once a relatively stable regional environment.

New Zealand cannot be a credible guarantor of Pacific stability, or a meaningful counterweight to external pressure on Pacific Island states, if it cannot put capable naval forces to sea. The point is not to militarise New Zealand's Pacific relationships. It is to ensure that when Pacific governments ask for help, New Zealand can arrive quickly with something useful: a ship, a helicopter, a sickbay, fresh water and engineers.

5.5 Sovereignty and the EEZ

There is a final argument for frigate replacement that operates at the level of national sovereignty rather than alliance management or regional strategy. New Zealand's exclusive economic zone is one of the largest in the world. The resources within it (fish, minerals, potential hydrocarbon deposits) are sovereign assets.

The right to control, manage, and exploit those resources is guaranteed by international law, but international law requires enforcement to be meaningful. A state that cannot patrol its own EEZ, that cannot intercept and board vessels operating illegally within it, and that cannot deter the exploitation of its marine resources by well-equipped foreign fleets, is exercising a nominal rather than a real sovereignty over that domain.

Routine enforcement is, and should remain, a layered system: satellites, P-8 surveillance aircraft, uncrewed systems, patrol vessels, and the civilian agencies, Customs, Fisheries and Police, that administer maritime law. The patrol vessels currently operated by the RNZN can perform their part of this function in moderate sea states and in the northern portions of the EEZ. They cannot operate reliably in the Southern Ocean, where some of the richest and most vulnerable fisheries in the EEZ are located. They cannot sustain multi-week deployments in the Sub-Antarctic waters where New Zealand's extended continental shelf rights are most at risk from unregulated activity.

And they cannot, in any circumstances, deter a state-sponsored fishing operation backed by coast guard vessels designed to intimidate and outgun a lightly armed patrol ship. The frigate is the platform that closes this gap, not by policing the entire EEZ single-handedly, but by providing the credible deterrent backstop that makes violations of New Zealand's maritime law genuinely risky rather than merely technically illegal.

6. The Candidate Platforms

As of May 2026, New Zealand's evaluation of ANZAC frigate replacements has narrowed to two candidates. The first is the Upgraded Mogami-class frigate, developed by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force. The second is the Type 31 frigate (Arrowhead 140 design), developed by Babcock International and entering service with the Royal Navy as the Inspiration class.

A brief comparative analysis is necessary to contextualise the procurement decision, although a full platform evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper.²⁵

Table 2: Candidate Platform Comparison

Criterion	ANZAC (current)	Upgraded Mogami	Type 31
Displacement	3,600 t	~6,200 t	~7,000 t
VLS Cells	Sea Ceptor (CAMM)	32 × Mk 41	Sea Ceptor; 32 × Mk 41 planned (UK)
ASW Capability	Hull-mounted sonar	OQQ-25 integrated suite	Fitted for towed array
Radar / CMS	ANZAC (upgraded)	OPS-50 phased array	Thales NS110 (UK fit)
Helicopter	1 × SH-2 (→ MH-60R)	1 × MH-60R compatible	1 × MH-60R compatible
Key Interop Advantage	Five Eyes baseline	Australia (SEA 3000)	UK / Five Eyes
Relative Cost	—	Higher	Lower
Design Life	Ends mid-2030s	30+ years	30+ years

Note: Specifications are indicative and vary by customer configuration; the fit of any New Zealand variant would be settled at contract. Sources: Naval News; Naval Technology; Australian Department of Defence; NZDF.

The Upgraded Mogami's primary advantage is capability depth, particularly in anti-submarine warfare (the OQQ-25 integrated sonar suite is among the most capable in production) and in its 32-cell Mk 41 VLS. The launcher is compatible with a wide range of munitions including Tomahawk cruise missiles, Standard Missiles, and ASROC anti-submarine rockets.

Its alignment with Australia's SEA 3000 selection is the single most strategically significant factor in New Zealand's evaluation: common platforms with the RAN would deliver interoperability benefits that could define the New Zealand-Australia naval relationship for a generation.

The Type 31's primary advantage is cost and the opportunity it creates for quantity. If the unit cost of the Type 31 allows New Zealand to procure three and perhaps four hulls rather than the current two within a comparable budget, this would materially change New Zealand's operational availability, to the benefit of Australia and the wider Southwest Pacific. Four frigates would sustain reliable operational availability where two cannot.

One ship in maintenance, one on deployment, one on reduced notice to deploy for contingency operations and one working up for longer term operational rotations further afield, the model for a sustained presence, requires four hulls as a minimum.

Several analysts, including Dr Peter Greener writing in Line of Defence, have argued that two ships should not be an option for the replacement programme.²⁶ The Type 31's modular architecture also allows progressive capability upgrades over the ship's service life, mitigating the risk of a capability gap at commissioning.

²⁵ 'Japan Welcomes New Zealand Interest in Upgraded Mogami-Class Frigate', Naval News, May 2026.

²⁶ Peter Greener, 'Two, Three, Four? How Many New Frigates for the Royal New Zealand Navy?', *Line of Defence* (January 2026).

UPGRADED MOGAMI	TYPE 31 / ARROWHEAD 140
 Displacement: ~6,200t Armament: 32 x Mk 41 VLS Cells ASW: OQQ-25 Integrated Sonar Suite	 Displacement: 5,700t Armament: 24 VLS Cells (Growth Margin) ASW: Fitted for Towed Array
Key Advantage: Perfect interoperability with Australia's SEA 3000 program.	Key Advantage: UK/Five Eyes alignment and lower unit cost.
Tradeoff: Higher unit cost.	Tradeoff: Lower baseline ASW depth, but cost savings could enable a 4-hull procurement.

6.1 Strategy first, and from that should come capability definition and delivery

Strategy, meaning defined ends, ways and means rather than slogans, must come first. Cabinet should be clear about what strategic effects it wants created and sustained across New Zealand's maritime domain before it selects a platform. This must include better situational awareness, both for New Zealand and for close neighbours who lack sovereign capabilities of their own.

Once the strategic direction is defined, declared and approved by Cabinet, capability definition and delivery must accelerate. The current acquisition framework moves too slowly for the strategic timetable now confronting the Government, and the opportunity the Defence Capability Plan has created for the NZDF, the Ministry of Defence and the wider National Security System is too important to lose to process.

If only we take the time to really ask ourselves what operating functions, systems and effects are needed, then we may find ourselves making broader investments into multi-role, amphibious and sustainment capabilities. These should include more drones, autonomous platforms and technologies to better project force and to protect the force to secure our national interests.

It is well acknowledged by those that serve and those that visit that our naval dockyards and wharves are at best out of date, at worst a strategic risk. As part of the investment there must be planning for the ability of our Navy to maintain and sustain our warships.

This debate must include the ability to store and process fuel at volume and velocity, not just for the RNZN but for those who will seek our support in the years to come. It must also include the ability to offer national sustainment, and resilience should there be a real energy crisis.

In the same vein there is a clear requirement for a sovereign dry dock, something that we currently outsource offshore (this is a risk which must surely sit on the national risk register). The Navy of tomorrow must be able to securely plan and conduct both short and long-term maintenance of our ships in our home ports.

All of which leads to a larger question: whether the Navy's current basing at Devonport, and the infrastructure that surrounds it, is fit for the next 30 years. That question, and what good would look like for the wider NZDF, is the subject of a forthcoming companion paper.

6.2 Learn from others: the German experience

Germany's Ministry of Defence cancelled the six-ship F126 frigate programme on 24 June 2026, after prime contractor Damen Schelde Naval Shipbuilding said it could not deliver on schedule or within budget. Costs had risen toward €18 billion against an original estimate of roughly €10 billion. Berlin is replacing it with up to eight smaller TKMS MEKO A-200 DEU frigates, four firm and four optional, with first delivery targeted for 2029.²⁷

Contractor selection and domestic industrial capacity. Handing Germany's largest postwar surface-combatant project to a foreign prime (Damen, a Dutch yard) with limited experience building at this scale and complexity left Berlin exposed when execution faltered. A proposed handover to Rheinmetall's NVL division came too late to save the programme. The episode reinforces a recurring argument in European defence circles that large naval builds are safer anchored to yards and primes with a proven track record on comparable ships, even if that means less competition on paper. The lesson for New Zealand is not that foreign builders should be avoided; any New Zealand build will rely on a foreign prime. It is that unproven integration risk and weak delivery discipline are dangerous wherever they sit.

Cost and schedule discipline in ambitious, clean-sheet designs. The F126 was conceived as a technologically advanced, highly automated frigate, and that ambition is precisely what made its budget and timeline so fragile; the projected cost nearly doubled before Berlin pulled the plug. It is a reminder that novel requirements (new automation, modularity, stealth features) compound schedule risk in ways that are hard to price accurately at contract signing. Governments need harder off-ramps and earlier warning triggers rather than waiting years to acknowledge a programme is failing.

Value of falling back on proven, modular designs when a bespoke programme collapses. Rather than trying to rescue F126, Germany pivoted to the MEKO A-200, an existing TKMS design already in service with other navies and buildable quickly in German yards. This shows the strategic benefit of maintaining a "known-good" fallback option alongside more ambitious next-generation programmes, so that a cancellation doesn't leave a capability gap: smaller, less capable ships delivered on time can matter more than superior ships delivered late or never.

7. Conclusion

The case for replacing New Zealand's ANZAC frigates does not rest on a single argument. It rests on the convergence of multiple, independently compelling imperatives that, taken together, leave no serious analytical room for doubt.

Sea power, the capacity to use the maritime domain for national purposes and to contribute to the collective management of the maritime order, is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in Mahan's era. The rules-based maritime order that has underwritten global prosperity since 1945 is under pressure from a rising China. Beijing challenges the legal framework, disputes the territorial rights of its neighbours and is building the naval forces to back those challenges with coercive power.

²⁷ 'Germany Is Cancelling the F126 Frigate Project and Procuring Eight MEKO Frigates', Naval News, June 2026; 'Germany Scraps F126 Frigate Program, Pivots to MEKO Warships amid Cost and Contractor Chaos', Defense News, 24 June 2026.

Small nations cannot be passive spectators of this competition: they must either contribute to the maintenance of the order they depend on or accept a diminished role in an order they did not shape and cannot influence.

New Zealand's access to the global commons (the maritime routes through which its exports and imports flow, the sea lanes that connect it to the alliance partners and trading relationships on which its prosperity depends) is not guaranteed. It has been maintained, for the past eight decades, by the maritime power of the United States and its allies. That maintenance requires contribution.

A New Zealand that cannot deploy a combat-capable surface combatant is a New Zealand that free-rides on an order it is unwilling to help defend, and one that, in the long run, cannot expect to continue benefiting from it.

While this paper set out to answer a single question more challenges have emerged. When considering maritime capability, we must move above the often-emotional Naval discussion on the nature and name of the ship. We must speak as professionals about the ability of the Navy to raise, train and sustain a warship for operational deployment, in training and alongside in a broad range of settings.

In closing, a frigate is more than a warship: it is New Zealand's primary instrument for exercising maritime sovereignty over its vast EEZ, for responding to Pacific crises, for contributing to alliance maritime security operations, and for sustaining the helicopter capability that a NZ\$2 billion investment in MH-60R Seahawks demands. It is the minimum platform through which a serious maritime nation can meet its responsibilities in the modern Indo-Pacific. New Zealand is a serious maritime nation. Its actions in the forthcoming procurement decision will determine whether it intends to remain one.

The ANZAC frigates will reach the end of their design lives in the mid-2030s. The planning, contracting, and build timelines for either candidate platform is such that a final decision must be made by 2027 – or sooner if we are serious (the government's own stated deadline for a Cabinet recommendation) to avoid a capability gap. That gap, once opened, would not be easily closed: rebuilding maritime combat credibility from zero takes a generation. The window for action is very narrow, and it is now rapidly closing. Cabinet should decide in 2027 not simply which ship to buy, but what maritime capability New Zealand is prepared to crew, arm, maintain and deploy for the next generation.

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