

WORTH DEFENDING

FREEDOM, PROSPERITY AND THE CASE FOR
A STRONGER NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE

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Executive Summary

This research note argues that a credible, combat-capable New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) is not a discretionary expense but an indispensable instrument of the nation's security, sovereignty and economic prosperity.

It begins with the historical record, tracing how New Zealand's defence posture has swung between expeditionary over-commitment abroad and chronic under-investment at home, and how three decades of post-Cold War drawdown has left the NZDF hollowed out at precisely the moment strategic competition was re-emerging in our own neighbourhood.

It then examines the 2025 Defence Capability Plan (DCP), which commits NZD 12 billion of capability investment over four years and sets an aspirational trajectory towards defence spending of more than 2 percent of GDP within eight years¹ - the largest planned military uplift New Zealand has attempted in a generation. Against this backdrop is set a rapidly deteriorating strategic environment in which great-power competition has moved from the abstract to the local, most visibly in the Pacific Islands region that New Zealand has long regarded as its own strategic backyard.

Using the Diplomatic-Informational-Military-Economic (DIME) framework for the instruments of national power, the note demonstrates that defence capability is not a stand-alone good but the foundation on which the credibility and effect of the other three instruments substantially depend.

Comparative case studies of Singapore, Finland, Denmark, and Israel illustrate how small, exposed states have converted limited resources into disproportionate strategic weight through sustained, whole-of-nation approaches to their national security.

The note concludes that the Defence Capability Plan should be read not as a defence portfolio decision in isolation, but as a down payment on New Zealand's first National Security Strategy, and that sustaining this trajectory – rather than reversing at the next change of government or fiscal cycle – is essential if New Zealand is to remain secure, sovereign and internationally credible as a trading nation in these days of growing uncertainty, complexity, volatility and ambiguity.

1. Introduction

The following words are attributed to Pericles, well over two thousand years ago, long before the first ANZAC Day, but only a stone's throw from Gallipoli.

*"Each has won a glorious grave – not that sepulchre of earth wherein they lie, but the living tomb of everlasting remembrance wherein their glory is enshrined. For the whole earth is the sepulchre of heroes. Monuments may rise and tablets be set up to them in their own land, but on far-off shores there is an abiding memorial that no pen or chisel has traced; it is engraven not on stone or brass, but on the living hearts of humanity. Take these men for your example. **Like them, remember that prosperity can be only for the free, that freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it.**"*

Through the ages the words of Pericles resonate with absolute clarity. Today across Western Europe decision makers talk more about the challenges of national security than any other issues. Big business seeks to better understand, define and mitigate geopolitical risk and yet here at home we continue to "monitor" academically admiring our national strategic horizon. We do this simply because for much of the past thirty years, the question of why New Zealand needs a defence force could be answered, not unreasonably, with reference to distance, friendship and good fortune.

New Zealand sits comfortably at the bottom of the world, our nearest large neighbour is a good, trusted and well-known mate, one that we have grown up with over generations. No state has seriously militarily threatened our sovereign territory since the Second World War (1939-1945). That answer was always more comfortable than complete, and today it is no longer sufficient.

I offer this note from the vantage point of a career spent in the New Zealand Defence Force, with operational service in a range of foreign fields, with service inside our own National Security System and also with service inside similar systems with our close friends and allies.

Over my service career I have watched first with concern and more recently with cautious approval, the slow erosion of this country's military capability and the partial attempt to rebuild it. All too often when I talk to people in our country many ask me, *"why do we even have a defence force; no one is going to attack us"*.

The purpose of this note is to set out, as plainly as the subject allows, why New Zealand continues to require a standing, **combat-capable** defence force. Following the introduction, the note proceeds in six sections.

- Section 2 reviews the historical background against which today's decisions should be judged.
- Section 3 assesses the contemporary threat environment.
- Section 4 examines the significance of the 2025 Defence Capability Plan as a response to that environment.
- Section 5 places defence within the broader Diplomatic-Informational-Military-Economic framework of national power, showing how the military instrument underwrites the others.
- Section 6 draws lessons from appropriately sized nations that have faced comparable strategic dilemmas with fewer resources than New Zealand possesses.
- Section 7 draws these threads together against New Zealand's National Security Strategy, before a short conclusion.

2. Historical Background

New Zealand's relationship with organised military force has always been shaped by two competing instincts: a willingness, even eagerness, to commit forces to conflicts far from home in support of larger partners, and a reluctance to sustain investment in home defence once the immediate emergency had passed. Both instincts are visible from the earliest colonial contingents to the present day, and both help explain why the country now finds itself rebuilding a force that was allowed to atrophy.

New Zealand's military expeditionary tradition began in the South African War, when ten contingents of mounted rifles - the first of them raised and equipped substantially at their own expense - sailed from New Zealand to fight alongside British forces between 1899 and 1902². It was consolidated at Gallipoli and was reinforced in both the Middle East and on the Western Front during the First World War, campaigns that, whatever their tactical outcome, did more than any other event to forge a distinct New Zealand national identity and the ANZAC tradition shared to this day with Australia.³

The pattern repeated in the Second World War, in the Korean War, in the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation, and in Vietnam, where New Zealand again committed ground combat forces in support of allied strategy. The lesson drawn by generations of New Zealand policymakers was that security lay less in independent capability than in reliable participation in collective arrangements with larger friends - Britain before 1945, and the United States and Australia after 1945.

That framework was formalised in the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, which for three decades provided the settled assumption underpinning New Zealand's defence planning: that the country did not need to generate a full spectrum of capability on its own account because it operated inside an alliance guaranteed by a well-known superpower.

This assumption was shattered in the mid-1980s. The Fourth Labour Government's anti-nuclear legislation, and its 1985 refusal of a port visit by the USS Buchanan over uncertainty about the vessel's nuclear armament (not the propulsion), brought New Zealand into direct conflict with a bipartisan United States policy of neither confirming nor denying nuclear weapons aboard its warships.⁴

On 17 September 1986 the United States formally suspended its ANZUS obligations to New Zealand, ended joint exercises and intelligence sharing, and, in President Reagan's phrase relayed by his administration, downgraded New Zealand from ally to 'friend but not ally' - a status that persisted in practice for more than two decades.⁵

Whatever the merits of the nuclear-free policy, which enjoys enduring and genuine public support, its practical effect on defence planning was to remove the assumption of automatic alliance backing that had shaped New Zealand strategy for a generation, without New Zealand ever fully replacing that assumption with a comparable investment in independent or partnered capability.

Instead, the opposite occurred. New Zealand defence spending fell from a cold war high of 2-3 percent and continued to fall until to around 1 percent of GDP by the mid-1990s as the 'peace dividend' was banked by successive governments of both major parties.⁶ Defence spending has hovered at or below 1 percent of GDP for most of the period since, well below the long-run 1960-2024 average of 1.85 percent and consistently towards the bottom of the OECD.⁷

This was not simply a matter of shrinking budgets; it produced deliberate capability decisions with long and enduring shadows. This approach also included generational deferment of investments across the defence real estate portfolio on which real world military capabilities, personnel and their families are sustained. The most consequential decision was the Fifth Labour Government's 2001

disbandment of the RNZAF's air combat force, withdrawing the Skyhawk fighter fleet and the Aermacchi trainers without replacement, after cancelling an earlier National-led decision to lease F-16 aircraft from the United States.

At this time the decision was justified by then Prime Minister Helen Clark on the basis that New Zealand lived in 'a benign strategic environment', with the projected NZD 870 million in savings redirected towards army equipment, maritime patrol and sealift capability for peacekeeping-oriented tasks.⁸

Whatever one's view of that trade-off, it reflects a recurring pattern: successive New Zealand governments have mistaken periods of relative calm for permanent conditions and dismantled capabilities that take a decade or more to rebuild—as the country is now about to discover.

The NZDF was not operationally idle during these decades of fiscal restraint. In addition to many of what were to be called “minor missions” the NZDF deployed at short notice to East Timor in 1999-2000 at a peak strength of 1,100 personnel, New Zealand's largest overseas deployment since the Korean War, as part of the Australian-led INTERFET force and the subsequent United Nations missions.⁹

Five New Zealand soldiers died in East Timor during their operational service as the new nation of Timor-Leste rose from the ashes of conflict. After 9/11 the nation committed forces to Afghanistan for nearly two decades, where more than 3,500 New Zealanders served and ten more New Zealand soldiers died.¹⁰ Throughout this period the NZDF continued to sustain peacekeeping, disaster-response and Pacific maritime-surveillance commitments more or less continuously.

These deployments demonstrated genuine operational competence and were, in the main, well regarded by partners. Especially our Special Operations Forces which are world class despite the significant fiscal and capability contrasts which they have endured. But in the main these deployments were substantially expeditionary and constabulary in character, undertaken within generally permissive environments and almost always under the practical air, logistics (including medical, particularly Air Medical Evacuations (AME)) and intelligence umbrella of larger allies. In the main they did not require, and so did not sustain a domestic constituency for, the kind of high-end combat capability – extended and persistent domain awareness, integrated full spectrum intelligence, air and missile defence, long-range precision strike, contested maritime domain awareness - that a genuinely uncertain strategic environment demands. That is the capability gap the 2025 Defence Capability Plan is now bravely attempting to close, and it is worth being brutally honest that closing the gap will take the better part of a decade even with sustained funding, because ships, aircraft, cutting edge technology with the required trained personnel cannot be conjured on the timescale of a single electoral cycle.

3. The Contemporary Threat Environment

In its Defence Policy and Strategy Statement, New Zealand's Ministry of Defence describes the country's strategic environment as "the most challenging and complex ... in decades". This assessment is justified by three developments.

First, and most consequentially for New Zealand specifically, strategic competition has arrived in the Pacific Islands region that this country has for generations regarded as its own sphere of primary responsibility and comparative advantage.

The clearest signal was the April 2022 security agreement between China and Solomon Islands, which raised the realistic prospect of a persistent Chinese security or military presence in the South Pacific for the first time. New Zealand's then Prime Minister described the prospect as 'gravely concerning', and the United States, in a rare moment of trans-Tasman-Pacific alignment, stated bluntly that a persistent Chinese military presence in the Pacific 'would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region and pose national-security concerns' to both New Zealand and Australia.¹¹

Whatever the eventual scope of that particular agreement, its diplomatic shock value lay in demonstrating that the assumption of an uncontested New Zealand and Australian sphere of influence in the Pacific could no longer be taken for granted. New Zealand's own Defence Policy and Strategy Statement now explicitly frames China as having shifted, in New Zealand's assessment, 'from a potential security partner to a revisionist actor' capable of projecting military and paramilitary power 'across the wider Indo-Pacific' and describes intensifying US-China strategic competition as the central driver of regional instability.¹² Additional stark examples of this reality can be seen with the live firing event by the PLAN in the Tasman Sea last year and on the 6th of July this year with the firing of an ICBM into the declared nuclear free Pacific area.

Second, this competition is occurring in a domain - the Pacific Ocean - that is disproportionately important to New Zealand's own geography and economy. New Zealand's Exclusive Economic Zone covers roughly 4 million square kilometres,¹³ including the waters around the Kermadec, Chatham, Bounty, Antipodes, Campbell, Auckland and Snares Islands.¹⁴ A nation with a maritime domain of that scale, and Pacific fisheries, undersea cable and search-and-rescue responsibilities to match, cannot credibly claim to be secure while lacking any meaningful capacity to patrol, monitor or, if required, police or defend that domain. This is not an abstract or symbolic point: undersea cables, exclusive economic zone fisheries enforcement, and the ability to respond to a natural disaster or a foreign incursion in the South Pacific are all, in the most literal sense, matters of maritime domain awareness and presence - capabilities that atrophy first and fast when defence budgets are cut.

Third, the broader Indo-Pacific and global order that has underwritten New Zealand's prosperity since 1945 - open sea lanes, a rules-based trading system, and a general (if imperfect) reluctance among major states to resolve disputes by force - is under greater strain than at any point in the post-Cold War period. It is on the world stage that our economic security is anchored and as many nations well know, economic security is the foundation of national security.

Russia's 2022 second invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that inter-state territorial aggression by a major power remains a live possibility in the twenty-first century, not a historical curiosity. Tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea carry direct implications for the trade routes on which a small, distant, trade-dependent economy like New Zealand's absolutely depends.

New Zealand's own National Security Strategy, its first ever, released in August 2023 under the title *Secure Together | Tō Tātou Korowai Manaaki*, identifies geostrategic competition and threats to the

rules-based international order as running through nearly all of the twelve national security issues it enumerates, from climate-driven displacement to foreign interference in New Zealand's own democratic institutions.¹⁵ Commentators at the time described the strategy as marking 'a turning point' and 'the end of old certainties' in New Zealand's traditional assumption of benign isolation.¹⁶

It is at this point also worth noting what has not changed:

1. New Zealand retains its independent foreign policy,
2. its nuclear-free legislation,
3. and a public preference for an approach to the Pacific grounded in partnership rather than militarisation.

The ongoing, deliberately unresolved debate over whether New Zealand should join the technology-sharing Pillar II of the AUKUS partnership with Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States illustrates this tension well. Government ministers have at various points signalled strong interest, citing 'powerful reasons' to participate, while officials have maintained what has been reported as a 'holding pattern', conscious of the diplomatic, regional and economic implications of closer alignment with an arrangement widely read in the region as aimed at China.¹⁷

Critics warn that AUKUS membership would represent a 'seismic shift' away from New Zealand's independent foreign policy tradition and its standing as a distinctively Pacific, non-nuclear voice; proponents argue the strategic environment has moved decisively enough that continued abstention carries its own costs to New Zealand's alliance credibility and interoperability.¹⁸

This note does not seek to resolve that question. It raises it to illustrate the broader argument: a country cannot meaningfully assess the diplomatic costs and benefits of arrangements such as AUKUS Pillar II unless it possesses, or is developing, military capabilities that would make its participation credible and valuable to partners. Diplomatic options therefore depend materially on military capability, as Section 5 explains.

4. The Defence Capability Plan: Recapitalising Deterrence

It is against this background that the significance of the 2025 Defence Capability Plan (DCP), released on 7 April 2025, should be judged. The plan commits NZD 12 billion of funding over four years, including NZD 9 billion of genuinely new spending beyond previously budgeted programmes, and sets out an indicative trajectory that would lift total defence spending above 2 percent of GDP within eight years - roughly double the level New Zealand has sustained through most of the post-Cold War period.¹⁹ It has been widely and accurately described as the largest defence investment programme New Zealand has undertaken in decades.²⁰

The plan's stated intent is to make the NZDF 'combat-capable', with enhanced lethality and deterrent effect, improved interoperability - above all with Australia - and a force structure sustainable out to 2040.²¹ Indicative allocations disclosed alongside the plan include up to NZD 300 million for long-range uncrewed aerial systems for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and most recently a strike capability across the Pacific and Southern Ocean; approximately NZD 2 billion to replace the Navy's ageing Seasprite maritime helicopters; and NZD 300-600 million for space-based communications, surveillance and navigation systems.²²

These are not glamour purchases. They are precisely the unglamorous, enabling capabilities - persistent surveillance, maritime lift, space-based communications - that a country with a four-million-square-kilometre maritime zone and Pacific security responsibilities has lacked for a generation, and whose absence has been quietly tolerated for so long that their re-acquisition now reads, misleadingly, as ambitious rather than merely overdue.

Three features of the DCP deserve particular emphasis for the argument of this note.

- First, its framing explicitly abandons the 'benign strategic environment' language used to justify the 2001 disbandment of the air combat force, replacing it with an assessment that New Zealand faces a strategic outlook it has not seen in decades - the DCP is, in this sense, less a discretionary enhancement than a correction of a historical under-investment that this note has already traced to its 1980s and 1990s origins.
- Second, the plan is explicitly sequenced against a 2040 horizon, an implicit acknowledgement that credible military capability cannot be assembled within a single parliamentary term, and that its value depends on multi-year political commitment surviving changes of government - a discipline New Zealand defence policy has not historically displayed.
- Third, and most relevant to Section 5 below, the plan is presented not as a purely military document but as underpinning New Zealand's wider diplomatic standing, particularly with Australia and other Five Eyes and Pacific partners, for whom New Zealand's willingness to invest in its own defence has long been, fairly or not, a proxy for its seriousness as a security partner more broadly.²³

None of this is to suggest the DCP is beyond challenge. NZD 12 billion, even with NZD 9 billion of new money, remains a modest sum in absolute terms by the standards of larger allies. A trajectory to 2 percent of GDP over eight years is a target that depends a great deal on the competent and strategic vision and leadership of the NZDF and MoD, modern acquisition frameworks, clear strategic risk protocols, robust fiscal discipline and political will of at least two, and probably three, further governments of different composition to see through. None of this will be easy today or tomorrow, more so when further strategic shocks are felt closer to home, as all indicators clearly point towards.

The historical record set out in Section 2 gives grounds for caution rather than complacency on that score. The argument of this note is not that the DCP is sufficient in itself, but that it represents the

necessary and, on the present record, credible first step in reversing a genuine and dangerous capability deficit - and that abandoning or diluting it in the next fiscal downturn, or election cycle, as New Zealand has done before, would be a strategic error of the first order.

5. The Instruments of National Power: A DIME Analysis

It is a truism of strategic studies, though no less true for being one, that nation states exercise power through more than their armed forces. The most widely used framework for organising this idea, developed within United States joint military doctrine but now used across allied and academic strategic writing, is DIME: the Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic instruments of national power.²⁴ Governments deploy these instruments singly or, more often and more effectively, in combination to advance and protect national interests.

The framework has limitations. Critics rightly argue that it underrepresents other instruments, including intelligence, law, finance and development, while newer models such as MIDFIELD seek to capture this broader complexity. Nevertheless, DIME remains a clear and useful way to show a point New Zealand policymakers have sometimes resisted: military power is not simply one of four interchangeable options, but a foundation that strongly influences the credibility of the other three. Each instrument is considered in turn.

Diplomatic power is the capacity to secure a state's interests through negotiation, alliance-building, representation in multilateral institutions and the cultivation of relationships with other states. New Zealand has historically punched above its weight diplomatically, from its role in founding the United Nations to its independent and often principled positions on nuclear non-proliferation, climate change and Pacific regionalism through the Pacific Islands Forum. But diplomatic capital is neither costless nor endlessly renewable. A state that wishes to be taken seriously in security dialogues – shaping, rather than simply receiving decisions about Pacific security architecture, Five Eyes intelligence sharing, or arrangements such as AUKUS Pillar II – must bring more than diplomatic goodwill and good arguments. It needs to show that it can make a practical contribution.

That means having skilled New Zealanders in the places where important security decisions are made. These roles are more than liaison or advisory positions. They require trusted people embedded in planning, intelligence, policy and operations, with enough credibility and access to influence decisions as they develop. New Zealand needs to value and protect those roles, because they help ensure the country is present when decisions affecting its security are made.

New Zealand officials have acknowledged that capability gaps constrain the country's influence in such debates as much as policy preferences do. A defence force able to contribute meaningfully to coalition operations, Pacific maritime surveillance and disaster response is therefore a diplomatic asset: it helps secure New Zealand a place in the forums where consequential decisions are made. Liaison officers cannot substitute for trusted, professionally credible representatives at the decision-making table.

Informational power encompasses a state's ability to shape narratives, contest disinformation, protect its own information environment, and use intelligence and strategic communication to advance its interests. New Zealand's National Security Strategy explicitly identifies foreign interference and attempts to subvert domestic democratic processes among its twelve national security priorities.²⁵

The NZDF's contribution to this instrument is often underappreciated: military intelligence capability, space-based surveillance and domain awareness of the kind funded under the DCP, and participation in Five Eyes intelligence sharing arrangements all depend on a baseline of technical and human capability that resides substantially within the defence and security sector. A hollowed-out defence force does not merely lose the ability to fight; it loses the sensors, satellite access, cyber-defence capacity and information-sharing standing that underwrite the country's broader informational resilience against grey-zone interference, disinformation campaigns and cyber intrusion - all of which New Zealand's National Security Strategy identifies as active, present-day threats rather than future contingencies.

Military power is the instrument most directly at issue in this note, and its purpose in a country of New Zealand's size is properly understood as deterrence, presence and contribution rather than the capacity to independently prevail against a major power - an ambition no New Zealand government has ever entertained, and none should.

Deterrence operates in two registers relevant here. The first is the deterrence of opportunistic coercion or incursion against New Zealand's own territory, EEZ and Pacific partners, achieved through demonstrated capability, persistent presence and the willingness to act - the maritime surveillance, long-range uncrewed systems and naval capability the DCP funds directly serve this purpose. The second, less often articulated but arguably more important for a state of New Zealand's size, is what might be called alliance deterrence: the assurance New Zealand provides to Australia and other partners that it will not become the weak link, the ungoverned gap or the free-riding neighbour in a contested Indo-Pacific security architecture.

New Zealand was for years criticised, not always unfairly, by Australian commentators as a defence 'free-rider' precisely because chronic under-investment made this second form of deterrence contribution doubtful.²⁶ The DCP is, among other things, a direct answer to that criticism, and its interoperability emphasis with the Australian Defence Force should be read as much as an act of alliance diplomacy as of military modernisation. The allied litmus test of the nation's commitment to its own security will be the success or failure of the DCP.

Economic power, the fourth instrument, refers to a state's capacity to use trade, investment, sanctions, aid and economic statecraft to advance its interests. New Zealand is a small, extraordinarily trade-exposed economy, and its prosperity depends on the continued functioning of open sea lanes and a rules-based international trading order that it has no capacity to guarantee unilaterally and that it therefore has every incentive to help defend collectively. The relationship between the military and economic instruments runs in both directions. Defence spending is itself a significant economic decision - the NZD 12 billion DCP represents real fiscal opportunity cost that must be weighed against health, education and infrastructure spending, and this note does not pretend otherwise. But the reverse dependency is at least as important and far less frequently acknowledged in New Zealand public debate: a New Zealand economy built on agricultural and horticultural exports, undersea cable connectivity and open access to Asian and North American markets has a direct economic stake in maritime security, freedom of navigation and Pacific stability that only a credible military instrument

can help secure. Economic power without the military capacity to protect its physical preconditions - open shipping lanes, secure undersea infrastructure, an uncoerced Pacific neighbourhood - is, in a genuinely contested environment, a wasting asset.

The value of the DIME framework for this note's argument is precisely that it resists treating these instruments as substitutes for one another. A government that reasons 'we are a small trading nation with an independent foreign policy, therefore we can rely on diplomacy and economic engagement rather than defence spending' misunderstands the relationship between the four instruments. It is closer to the truth to say that New Zealand's diplomatic voice, its informational resilience, and its economic security in the Pacific and beyond all rest, to a greater degree than is comfortable to admit, on a foundation of credible military capability - and that the DCP's significance lies as much in what it enables across diplomacy, information and economics as in what it delivers militarily.

6. Lessons from Smaller Nations

Unsurprisingly New Zealand is far from the only small, exposed state to have confronted the question of how to generate meaningful security with limited resources. Four comparative cases – Singapore, Finland, Denmark and Israel - offer instructive, if imperfect, parallels. These four nations are offered as examples because of their size and approach to their own national security as a reference point against New Zealand.

Singapore offers an instructive model. Lacking strategic depth and constrained by a small population and land area, Singapore built its 'Total Defence' concept from 1984 around six pillars - military, civil, economic, social, psychological and digital defence - integrating conscription (24 months' national service for all male citizens and permanent residents), heavy investment in technologically sophisticated armed forces, and a deliberate 'poisoned shrimp' or, in more recent formulations, 'porcupine' deterrence doctrine designed to make aggression against Singapore disproportionately costly for any credible adversary.²⁷ Singapore has consistently spent between 3 and 4 percent of GDP on defence, several multiples of New Zealand's historical norm, on the explicit rationale that a small state's security cannot be assumed and must instead be continuously purchased through capability and deterrent credibility. Singapore's economic success has not been treated by its own government as a substitute for military investment, but as the very resource base that makes sustained military investment possible - a relationship of mutual reinforcement, not trade-off, that New Zealand's DIME analysis in Section 5 suggests is closer to New Zealand's own true position than public debate often allows.

Finland has developed what it calls the Comprehensive Security Concept, an evolution of the older Nordic 'total defence' model, under which national security is treated explicitly as a societal function shared across government, private industry, civil institutions and the general public, rather than the sole responsibility of the armed forces.²⁸ Finland's approach - deep civil-defence infrastructure, near-universal reserve obligations, extensive stockpiling, and close integration of military and civilian resilience planning - reflects the lived experience of a small state sharing a long land border with a much larger and historically aggressive neighbour. Finland's 2023 accession to NATO, ending decades of careful non-alignment, was itself a recognition that comprehensive societal resilience, however impressive, is not a substitute for credible collective defence guarantees once the threat environment deteriorates sufficiently – a lesson New Zealand, an island state without Finland's land-border exposure, should nonetheless not dismiss as inapplicable to its own more maritime and Pacific-oriented circumstances.

Denmark, a small NATO member of comparable population to New Zealand with its own history of Arctic and North Atlantic maritime responsibility through Greenland and the Faroe Islands, illustrates a middle case closer to New Zealand's likely trajectory: a state that allowed defence capability to decline substantially after the Cold War, then found itself, amid deteriorating relations with Russia and renewed great-power interest in the Arctic, committing to significant and sustained increases in defence spending and capability from the mid-2010s onward in order to remain a credible NATO contributor and to protect its own Arctic and North Atlantic maritime interests. Denmark's experience

- rapid drawdown followed by an uncomfortable, expensive, decade-long process of rebuilding once the strategic environment shifted - is arguably the closest analogue to New Zealand's own present position, and its lesson is a cautionary one: capability given up cheaply during a period of perceived calm is recovered only slowly, and at far greater relative cost, once circumstances change.

Israel represents the most extreme case of a small state whose national existence has depended on continuous, high-intensity investment in defence, built around near-universal conscription, a large reserve mobilisation base, indigenous defence-industrial capacity, and close alliance management with the United States. Few would argue New Zealand's threat environment approaches Israel's, and this note does not suggest otherwise; the case is included because it demonstrates, in the starkest possible terms, the general principle that a small state's diplomatic and economic achievements - and Israel's technology-sector economy is a genuine achievement - have historically been judged by Israeli strategic planners to depend upon, rather than substitute for, credible and continuously renewed military capability.

The common thread across all four cases, despite their considerable differences in geography, threat and political culture, is that none of these states treated defence investment as separable from their broader diplomatic standing, economic security or informational resilience. Each, in its own way, understood defence capability as the precondition for, rather than the alternative to, an effective foreign policy and a secure economy. That is precisely the understanding New Zealand's own Defence Capability Plan implicitly embodies, and it is the understanding this note argues New Zealand's political leadership and public should now make explicit.

7. From Defence to National Security

This note has argued that a credible defence force is a precondition for effective diplomacy, informational resilience and economic security alike. It remains to connect this argument explicitly to New Zealand's own National Security Strategy.

Secure Together | Tō Tātou Korowai Manaaki, launched in August 2023 as New Zealand's first ever national security strategy, was developed in part to embed the lessons of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch terrorist attack, and sets out a vision for security that is described by its authors as 'focused, integrated and inclusive'.²⁹ Critically, the strategy does not treat national security as a synonym for defence, nor does it rank defence as the pre-eminent concern among the twelve national security issues it identifies, which range from terrorism and serious organised crime through to climate change, biosecurity and threats to democratic institutions.³⁰ This is, in my judgement, the correct approach: New Zealand's security challenges are genuinely broader than any single agency, including the NZDF, can address alone.

But an integrated national security strategy of this kind is only as credible as the capability that sits behind each of its component parts, and for a meaningful subset of the strategy's stated priorities - geostrategic competition, the resilience of the rules-based international order, the security and stability of the Pacific, and the protection of New Zealand's maritime domain and critical undersea infrastructure - defence capability is not one contributing factor among many but the central and, in some cases, the only available instrument.

A strategy that correctly identifies Pacific instability or great-power competition as a national security priority, while allowing the defence force best placed to monitor, deter and respond to exactly those risks to continue operating at historically low levels of investment, would not be an integrated strategy but a rhetorical one.

The 2025 Defence Capability Plan should therefore be understood as the National Security Strategy's most consequential single act of implementation to date: it is the point at which a stated national security priority - a stable, uncontested Pacific and a resilient rules-based order - is finally matched with a level of resourcing proportionate to the priority's stated importance.

This linkage cuts in both directions, and the second direction is equally important for how the defence sector itself should understand its mandate. If defence capability is to be judged, as it should be, against national security outcomes rather than narrower military metrics, then the NZDF's own priorities - Pacific maritime surveillance, humanitarian and disaster response, cooperation with police and intelligence agencies on transnational crime and foreign interference, and interoperability with Australia and other partners on shared regional threats - are correctly weighted at least as heavily as traditional warfighting capability in the DCP's own design.

The plan's emphasis on uncrewed strike, intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance systems, space-based domain awareness, communications and maritime helicopters over, for instance, additional

land combat platforms, reflects exactly this national-security-led rather than narrowly military-led logic, and is, in my assessment, the right set of choices for New Zealand's actual risk profile.

8. Conclusion

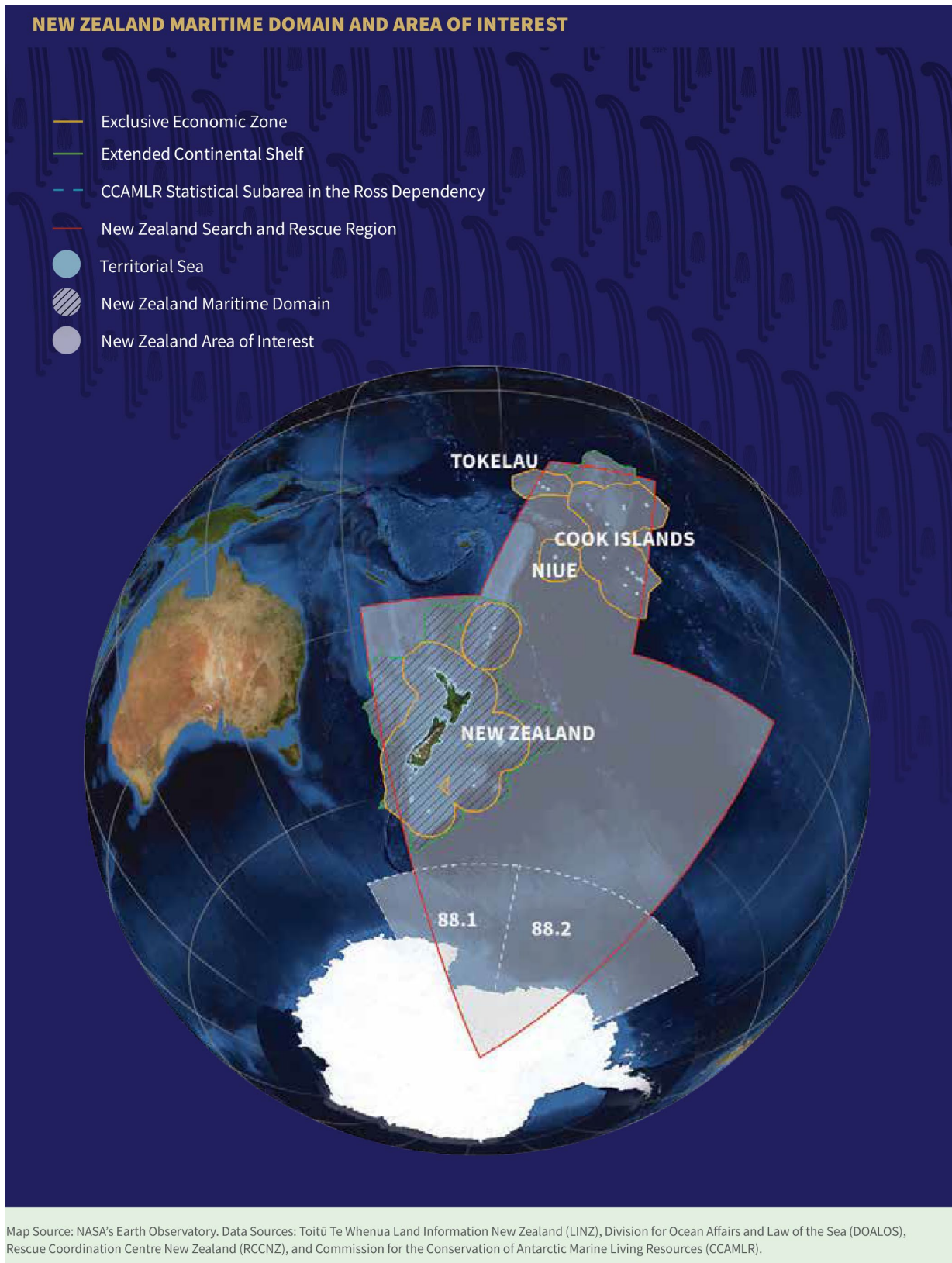
New Zealand does not need a defence force capable of defeating a major power in open conflict; no realistic level of investment could achieve that, nor has any government proposed it. What New Zealand does need is a credible, combat-capable defence force that can help protect its maritime domain, support its Pacific responsibilities, contribute meaningfully with partners and ensuring its diplomacy is backed by practical capability.

The historical record shows why this matters. New Zealand has made this mistake before, treating periods of relative calm as permanent conditions and allowing hard-won capability to be dismantled on timescales far shorter than the decade or more required to rebuild it. If the nation is able to learn the harsh lessons of 1940, 1941, 1942 and 1943 – to be found in the names carved in the wood in our national debating chamber: Greece, Crete, North Africa, the Pacific – paid for in full with both blood and treasure, then we may not needlessly once more place our sacrifices on the altar of freedom as previous generations have so painfully done.

The 2025 Defence Capability Plan is therefore a serious and overdue attempt to correct that pattern. It should not be judged as a complete solution. It is a beginning, not an end point. Its success will depend on two key pillars: first, whether successive governments, across political cycles, are willing to sustain the investment and discipline required to rebuild credible capability through to 2040. Second, whether both the NZDF and MoD have the strategic and transformational leadership required to deliver the DCP at the speed of relevance.

On the evidence set out in this note, sustaining that trajectory is not simply a matter of defence policy. It is an investment in New Zealand's diplomatic standing, informational resilience and economic security and national sovereignty. It is also the necessary foundation on which New Zealand's first National Security Strategy must rest. If New Zealand is to shape events, rather than simply absorb the consequences of a more dangerous world, it must give the next generation of ANZACs the tools, capabilities and partnerships they will need. The ANZACs of tomorrow will not judge us well if we fail to set the conditions for their success on tomorrow's battlefields, while the ANZACs of the past will never forgive us if we fail to learn from their harsh experiences of war. Pericles' words remain as relevant today as they did in his day and age, *"Remember that prosperity can be only for the free, that freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it."*

Appendix 1: New Zealand's maritime domain and area of interest



Reproduced from Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, New Zealand's National Security Strategy 2023-2028, p.28, under CC BY 4.0.

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