



INSIGHT PAPER / NEW ZEALAND, STRATEGIC SECURITY & DEFENCE REFORM

Beyond the Defence Force

Rethinking New Zealand's National Security Model in the Twenty-First Century

A case for replacing the inherited military model with a security architecture built around sovereignty, policing, maritime awareness, technology and national resilience

FOCUS

**Defence reform | Maritime sovereignty | Strategic neutrality |
Police capability | Pacific security | National resilience**

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EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT

Executive Summary

New Zealand is entering a defence investment cycle that will shape the country's security posture for a generation. The 2025 Defence Capability Plan (DCP) is explicit about the direction of travel: the Government intends to rebuild the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) into a more combat-capable force, increase lethality and deterrent effect, deepen integration with Australia and invest in intelligence, surveillance, uncrewed systems and space-enabled technologies. It has committed to lifting defence expenditure to more than 2 percent of gross domestic product within eight years, with NZ\$12 billion of planned commitments over the first four years, including NZ\$9 billion of new spending.[1][2] The Maritime Fleet Renewal programme is simultaneously examining how to replace an ageing naval fleet, including future replacement of the two Anzac-class frigates in the 2029-2039 period and focused consideration of the United Kingdom's Type 31 and Japan's Mogami-class designs.[3]

The conventional interpretation of these developments is that New Zealand has allowed its armed forces to decline too far and must now rebuild them for a more dangerous international environment. That argument is coherent and should be treated seriously. This paper, however, challenges its starting assumption. The question should not be whether New Zealand can make the existing military model more capable. The more important question is whether the traditional military model remains the best mechanism for protecting a remote, trade-dependent Pacific country of approximately five million people whose most immediate security problems are not invasion, mechanised warfare or air superiority.

The hypothesis advanced here is deliberately disruptive: New Zealand should consider ending the traditional three-service defence establishment and replacing it, over a managed transition, with a national security architecture centred on a substantially stronger police and intelligence capability, a dedicated border and maritime sovereignty service, persistent uncrewed and space-enabled surveillance, modest patrol and response vessels, cyber protection, and a standing national resilience and emergency-response capability. International security contributions would continue, but they would increasingly be delivered through policing, intelligence, maritime enforcement, engineering, disaster relief and specialist technical support rather than through the maintenance of a miniature conventional military.

This is not an argument that New Zealand faces no security threats, nor does it rest on the proposition that military power has become irrelevant. The international system is demonstrably more contested. New Zealand has interests in a stable Pacific, open sea lanes, a functioning rules-based trading system and the security of its Realm. It benefits materially from Five Eyes intelligence access and from the relationship with Australia. The point is narrower and harder: New Zealand's current and proposed conventional forces do not give it an independent capacity to defeat a major military power, while the opportunity cost of trying to preserve a broad spectrum of military functions is substantial.

The scale issue is unavoidable. At 30 June 2025 the NZDF comprised 15,141 regular, reserve and civilian personnel, including 8,865 Regular Force members. The Army accounted for 4,333 Regular Force personnel, the Navy 2,142 and the Air Force 2,390.[4] These are highly capable professional cadres, but they are not the mass required for independent high-intensity warfare. New Zealand has no tanks; its principal armoured combat fleet is the NZLAV, supported by Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles. It does retain 105 mm L119 light artillery and the DCP envisages a future land-based strike project to replace or augment that capability, potentially with self-propelled or rocket-based systems.[5][6] The country has no fighter aircraft and therefore no independent air-superiority or air-interception capability. Its two frigates are useful coalition platforms, but two ships cannot provide continuous combat presence across New Zealand's enormous maritime jurisdiction while also meeting maintenance, training and deployment requirements.

The strongest argument for the traditional NZDF is therefore not independent territorial defence. It is alliance utility, strategic insurance and the option to contribute to coalition military operations. That is a legitimate policy choice, but it should be described accurately. New Zealand is being asked to spend substantially more in order to improve its value inside a wider allied military system. The DCP itself describes the NZDF as a 'force multiplier with Australia' and envisages an increasingly integrated Anzac force.[1] If that is the policy objective, the public debate should recognise that the principal return is alliance interoperability and coalition capability rather than an autonomous shield around New Zealand.

The historical record reinforces this distinction. Since 1945, New Zealand forces have fought in Korea, served in the Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation, deployed to Vietnam, supported stabilisation in East Timor and Solomon Islands, operated in Afghanistan and Iraq, and repeatedly assisted after disasters at home and across the Pacific. These missions were often important and sometimes dangerous, but most were expeditionary, coalition, peace-support, stabilisation or humanitarian tasks rather than defence of New Zealand territory. Korea itself contributed directly to the pursuit of a United States security commitment and the 1951 ANZUS Treaty. NZ History notes that fear of damaging ANZUS was later a major factor in the decision to commit combat troops to Vietnam.[7][8]

That history should be respected rather than used uncritically as a blueprint. The fact that an institution has repeatedly found useful work does not prove that its current structure is the optimal way to deliver future security. RAMSI in Solomon Islands is especially instructive: the durable security problem was the restoration of law and order, public administration and institutional legitimacy, not the defeat of a conventional enemy. New Zealand's contribution to Pacific stability in the coming decades is likely to be strongest in the same areas - policing, governance, disaster response, maritime enforcement and resilience - rather than through warfighting platforms designed for major-power conflict.

Maritime security is the clearest place to rethink the model. The DCP itself acknowledges the requirement for persistent situational awareness and proposes long-range uncrewed aerial vehicles, uncrewed surface and subsurface systems and other technologies to help monitor and protect the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[9] This is a significant concession to the logic advanced in this paper. New Zealand's problem is not simply that it lacks enough warships; it is that a small crewed fleet cannot be present continuously across an immense ocean area. A distributed network of satellites, long-endurance UAVs, autonomous surface craft, data fusion and relatively inexpensive patrol vessels can generate persistence that a small number of frigates cannot.

The argument becomes more important when defence expenditure is considered alongside broader national resilience. The Government has chosen a path toward spending more than 2 percent of GDP on defence. That is a political choice, not a natural law. For New Zealand, a dollar allocated to high-end naval combat capability is a dollar unavailable for policing, health resilience, education, cyber security, transport redundancy, civil defence or critical infrastructure. These areas are not merely social spending alternatives. They are themselves components of national security. A society that can keep hospitals functioning, protect telecommunications, secure ports and borders, preserve energy supply, rapidly restore transport links and maintain social trust is harder to coerce and more capable of surviving crisis.

The alternative proposed in this paper is therefore not demilitarisation without replacement. It is substitution. A stronger New Zealand Police would assume expanded national-security, counter-terrorism and serious organised-crime functions. A Border and Maritime Security Agency would integrate maritime law enforcement, fisheries protection, customs support and sovereign patrol functions. A National Surveillance Command would combine commercial and government satellite data, aircraft, drones, autonomous vessels and intelligence feeds into a persistent operating picture. A National Resilience and Emergency Corps, aligned with NEMA, would retain engineering, logistics, communications and deployable emergency capabilities that are currently among the NZDF's most publicly valued domestic functions.

This model would still require relationships with Australia and other partners. Indeed, the smaller the conventional military footprint, the more important intelligence cooperation, diplomatic depth and carefully defined security guarantees become. Iceland demonstrates that a NATO member can maintain no standing army while using a coast guard and allied relationships for wider defence. Costa Rica, Panama and Mauritius demonstrate different combinations of police, border, maritime and external security arrangements. None is a direct template for New Zealand, but together they demonstrate that the conventional Army-Navy-Air Force structure is a policy choice rather than a requirement of sovereignty.

The issue of China makes the choice politically difficult. New Zealand's principal security partnerships remain Western, while China is its largest trading partner: two-way trade exceeded NZ\$41 billion in the year ending September 2025.[10] This creates a structural imbalance between the states New Zealand looks to for security and the market most important to its export economy. Previous ADG Consult analysis argued for strategic neutrality and practical non-alignment rather than deeper participation in AUKUS Pillar II, on the basis that New Zealand's strategic circumstances differ fundamentally from those of Australia and the United States. The present paper extends that logic. If New Zealand does

not seek to become a military participant in great-power bloc competition, it should question whether force structure should continue to be designed primarily for interoperability inside that competition.

The conclusion is necessarily provocative. New Zealand should not buy major combat platforms merely because comparable allies possess them, and it should not preserve military institutions simply because they are familiar. It should define the security outcomes it needs and build institutions around those outcomes. The transition would need to be gradual, legally careful and respectful of personnel and alliance relationships. But the direction should be clear: from a small conventional military toward a larger, integrated national security and resilience system with maritime awareness, policing and technology at its centre.

KEY ASSESSMENT

A Different Security Architecture

New Zealand can continue to spend significantly more on rebuilding the NZDF and still remain unable to defend itself independently against a major military power. The proposed alternative is not to accept vulnerability; it is to recognise that New Zealand's most credible defence is layered. Geography, intelligence partnerships, diplomacy and international legitimacy provide strategic depth. Police, border and cyber capability address the threats most likely to reach New Zealand directly. Persistent maritime surveillance protects sovereign resources. Resilient infrastructure and emergency capability reduce the effect of coercion or disaster. These functions should form the core of national security rather than remain supporting activities around a conventional military establishment.

The recommended end state is a deliberately non-traditional New Zealand National Security System. It would retain the ability to use force for law enforcement, counter-terrorism, maritime interception and protection of critical national interests, but it would not maintain broad conventional warfighting capability for expeditionary coalition campaigns. New Zealand would remain closely connected to Australia and Five Eyes intelligence cooperation while adopting a more selective security posture and placing much greater value on economic security, Pacific legitimacy and strategic flexibility.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Historical Legacy of New Zealand Defence Thinking

New Zealand's current defence structure is not the result of a single modern strategic decision. It is the accumulated product of more than a century of imperial relationships, global war, alliance politics and institutional continuity. The country's early military arrangements developed inside the British imperial system, in which New Zealand's security was ultimately guaranteed by British maritime power and New Zealand contributed manpower and expeditionary forces to wider imperial campaigns. The underlying bargain was contribution in exchange for protection. That logic was rational for a small dominion with limited industry and no capacity to sustain an independent major-power defence establishment.

The First World War embedded expeditionary service into national identity. More than 100,000 New Zealanders served overseas from a population of just over one million. Gallipoli and the Western Front became foundational national experiences. The Second World War reinforced the same strategic culture, although the Pacific war also exposed a genuine possibility that instability in Asia could approach New Zealand's region. Again, however, New Zealand's defence was achieved principally through collective victory alongside much larger powers rather than through independent territorial defence.

The post-war transition did not overturn the basic model; it changed the patron. Britain remained important, but the United States became central to Pacific security. Korea was both a collective-security operation and a vehicle through which Wellington pursued a stronger American security commitment. NZ History records that the Korean crisis helped New Zealand obtain the ANZUS Treaty in 1951, a development with long-term effects on foreign and defence policy.[7] The same alliance logic later shaped Vietnam: official historical material notes that concern about damaging ANZUS was a major factor behind the 1965 combat commitment.[8]

The result was a defence culture in which overseas contribution itself acquired strategic meaning. Participation demonstrated reliability; reliability strengthened relationships; relationships were expected to increase New Zealand's security. This produced an institutional preference for forces that could deploy with partners rather than forces designed solely for domestic territorial defence. The arrangement was reinforced by the Five Power Defence Arrangements and longstanding military links with Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

The end of the Cold War created an opportunity to reassess the model from first principles. New Zealand did make substantial changes. The most significant was the 2001 disbandment of the RNZAF air combat force following cancellation of the planned F-16 lease. The decision demonstrated that a capability could be historically important, professionally valued and still be judged unsustainable or unnecessary for contemporary national policy.[11] Yet the broader three-service structure survived. Army, Navy and Air Force remained the organisational grammar of defence, even as the actual missions increasingly centred on peace support, maritime surveillance, transport, humanitarian assistance and coalition participation.

This institutional continuity matters because it shapes today's debate. When policymakers ask how to respond to a more contested world, the answer is often framed as recapitalising each service: replace the frigates, replace land combat systems, improve strike capability, add uncrewed systems and strengthen interoperability. The 2025 DCP is a sophisticated expression of that logic. It does not simply buy old-style platforms; it incorporates technology and unmanned systems. But it still starts from the assumption that the three-service military remains the primary national security institution and that New Zealand should be capable of sustained combat operations alongside partners.[1][9]

The alternative approach begins one level earlier. Before deciding what the Army, Navy and Air Force require, government should decide what security outcomes the country requires. If a function can be delivered more effectively by police, customs, fisheries officers, civil defence engineers, commercial aircraft, contracted heavy logistics or autonomous surveillance, then the historical location of that function inside the NZDF should not determine its future ownership. Institutional history is relevant to transition; it should not be allowed to define the end state.

Military heritage can be preserved without preserving every military structure. New Zealand can honour Gallipoli, El Alamein, Cassino, Kapyong, Malaya, Vietnam, East Timor and Afghanistan while concluding that the strategic model that generated those deployments is no longer the best fit. National memory is not a capability requirement. The strongest respect for past service is to apply the same seriousness to future security choices that earlier generations applied to theirs.

STRATEGIC REALITY

Geography, Scale and the Threat Environment

New Zealand's geography is simultaneously a vulnerability and its most powerful defence asset. It is a remote archipelagic state in the South Pacific, separated from Australia by roughly 2,000 kilometres of ocean and far removed from the land frontiers that dominate defence planning in Europe and much of Asia. The country has no hostile land neighbour, no disputed continental border and no immediate conventional adversary capable of assembling ground forces on its frontier. Any hostile state seeking to invade and occupy New Zealand would first need to generate extraordinary long-range maritime and air power, sustain it over great distance and overcome the diplomatic and military consequences of attacking a stable member of a dense network of Western relationships.

That does not mean invasion is impossible in an absolute sense; serious strategic analysis should avoid impossibility claims. It means the threshold for a conventional attack is exceptionally high. A state capable of projecting and sustaining an invasion force across the Pacific against New Zealand would be a major military power. Against that actor, New Zealand's existing force - and any plausible force funded by a country of its size - would be severely outmatched. Two frigates, several thousand soldiers and a non-combat air force cannot independently create air superiority, sea control or the mass needed to defeat such an operation. The practical defence would depend on warning, alliances, partner intervention, dispersal, resilience and denial rather than independent conventional victory.

Scale therefore matters more than individual platform quality. At the end of September 2025 the Regular Force comprised approximately 4,392 Army personnel, 2,210 Navy personnel and 2,431 Air Force personnel.[4] These

numbers can produce highly trained tactical units, specialist teams and credible coalition contributions. They cannot generate the operational depth of a modern joint force capable of prolonged high-intensity warfare. Every ship in maintenance, every aircraft unavailable for service and every battalion committed overseas removes a material proportion of national capability.

The Army illustrates the distinction between professional capability and strategic mass. New Zealand does possess artillery: the L119 105 mm Light Gun remains in service, and the DCP envisages a replacement Future Land-based Strike project. It also operates NZLAV armoured vehicles and Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles.[5][6] The critique is therefore not that the Army has 'no artillery' or 'no armour'. It is that these systems exist in small numbers inside a force without the layered air defence, attack aviation, deep fires, mass logistics, electronic warfare and reserves that characterise a self-contained modern land force. New Zealand's Army can fight, but it is designed to fight as part of something larger.

The RNZAF presents the same strategic reality more starkly. Since the end of the air combat force in 2001, New Zealand has not maintained fighter aircraft. The Air Force's value lies principally in maritime patrol, transport, helicopter operations, training, search and rescue, surveillance and support. The P-8A Poseidon is a highly capable maritime surveillance and anti-submarine platform, and the C-130J and NH90 fleets provide valuable mobility. But the country does not possess the aircraft, weapons, ground-based air defence network or command infrastructure needed to independently contest control of its airspace against a major power.

The Navy is similarly capable but small. The two Anzac frigates provide sophisticated sensors, weapons and the ability to operate with allied task groups, while HMNZS Canterbury and other vessels provide sealift, patrol and support functions. Yet a two-frigate combat fleet inherently produces limited persistence. A ship can be operational, training, refitting or undergoing maintenance; it cannot be in several places simultaneously. The maritime area New Zealand must observe includes its EEZ, the South Pacific, the Southern Ocean and responsibilities associated with the Ross Dependency. This is fundamentally a persistence problem, not simply a warship problem.

The DCP itself recognises this reality. It calls for persistent situational awareness and specifically identifies long-range uncrewed aerial vehicles, uncrewed surface systems and subsurface systems to monitor and protect the EEZ and support Pacific partners.[9] This creates an important policy opening. If uncrewed systems are necessary because conventional platforms cannot provide adequate persistence, New Zealand should ask whether those systems are supporting the correct force structure - or whether they point toward a different structure altogether.

The most probable direct security threats are also predominantly below the threshold of conventional war. Transnational organised crime, narcotics trafficking, illegal fishing, cyber activity, foreign interference, espionage, supply-chain disruption, critical infrastructure failure and natural disaster are all more likely to affect New Zealand directly than armoured invasion. Some of these threats can have state sponsorship or strategic consequences, but their immediate management belongs primarily to police, intelligence, customs, cyber and regulatory institutions.

New Zealand therefore needs a security model that is strongest where actual exposure is greatest. A well-resourced intelligence service capable of identifying hostile networks; police able to investigate organised crime and terrorism; border agencies capable of intercepting illicit movements; cyber specialists able to protect critical systems; and a persistent maritime picture may protect sovereignty more effectively on an everyday basis than a high-end platform held for a conflict in which New Zealand could not operate independently anyway.

The strategic objective should be to make New Zealand difficult to coerce and difficult to disrupt. That is different from trying to make it militarily symmetrical with an adversary. A resilient state can continue governing, communicating, trading and restoring essential services under pressure. It can expose covert interference, secure ports and airports, identify suspicious maritime behaviour, diversify critical supplies and mobilise civilian technical capacity. Those are realistic forms of deterrence for a small state.

FORCE STRUCTURE

The Limits of the Current NZDF Model

The NZDF should be assessed fairly. Its personnel are not ceremonial placeholders. New Zealand soldiers exercise in complex warfighting environments, including with the Australian Army; Navy crews deploy internationally; and Air Force platforms conduct real surveillance, transport and support missions. In 2025, for example, New Zealand sent a combat team, NZLAVs, Bushmasters, HMNZS Te Kaha, NH90 helicopters, a P-8A Poseidon and supporting specialists to Exercise Talisman Sabre in Australia, explicitly to improve combat readiness and interoperability.[12] The argument for reform is therefore not that the force lacks professional competence. It is that competence is being directed toward a strategic model whose principal effect is coalition contribution rather than independent defence.

For the Army, the practical question is what land mission New Zealand expects to undertake alone. Defending the main islands against a state-level invasion would require an integrated national campaign involving air defence, coastal surveillance, long-range fires, substantial reserves, protected mobility, hardened logistics and allied support. The existing Army is not built at that scale. Conversely, the Army's strongest recurring contributions - infantry companies, engineers, special operations, logistics, training teams and civil-emergency support - can be understood as specialist deployable capabilities rather than proof that New Zealand requires a conventional army as a permanent institutional category.

Special operations capability is a harder case. A small state can derive disproportionate value from a highly trained special operations force for counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, strategic reconnaissance and limited overseas missions. A future national security model need not abolish every military skill. It could retain a small armed national response group under a security-service structure, particularly for counter-terrorism and high-risk external operations. The institutional question is whether such a capability requires an entire traditional land force around it or can be sustained as a specialised national asset.

Artillery raises a similar issue. The Army's 105 mm guns provide useful indirect fire and the DCP contemplates replacement with more capable systems.[6] In coalition warfare, additional strike capability improves interoperability and tactical utility. For homeland security, however, artillery becomes relevant only after a conventional enemy has generated forces close enough to New Zealand to be engaged on land. That scenario presupposes the failure of geography, intelligence, diplomacy, allied deterrence and maritime warning. It is not irrational to maintain such insurance, but its cost should be compared with investments that act earlier in the threat chain.

The Air Force already demonstrates how radical capability choices can be absorbed. Removing fighter aircraft in 2001 did not end New Zealand's sovereignty or international partnerships. It shifted emphasis toward mobility, surveillance and support. The policy controversy was real, and critics argue the decision removed an important strategic option. Yet a quarter-century later New Zealand still relies on partners for high-end air combat. The useful question now is whether the remainder of the force should be examined with the same discipline: what outputs are genuinely sovereign requirements, and which exist mainly to sustain a familiar service structure?

Maritime patrol is clearly sovereign. New Zealand must understand activity in its approaches and EEZ. Air mobility is also strategically valuable because geographic isolation makes rapid movement of people and supplies essential. Helicopters provide domestic and regional response capability. These functions can remain even if the Air Force as a conventional armed service is reorganised. Aircraft could operate under a National Aviation and Surveillance Service combining government crews, civilian contractors and specialised security personnel.

The Navy is the most politically sensitive because naval vessels are visible symbols of sovereignty. A frigate entering a foreign port communicates partnership, capability and national presence. But symbolism must be distinguished from persistence. If the policy purpose is to demonstrate support to allies in contested waters, a frigate is appropriate. If the purpose is to identify illegal fishing, narcotics trafficking or suspicious vessels across millions of square kilometres, distributed surveillance and patrol assets are more efficient. New Zealand needs to decide which mission has priority rather than allowing one platform category to carry both arguments simultaneously.

There is also an institutional overhead inherent in preserving three separate services. Each maintains command arrangements, career structures, doctrine, training systems, uniforms, traditions and headquarters functions. Some separation is operationally sensible because land, maritime and aviation skills differ. But New Zealand should test

whether all of the organisational duplication is necessary at current scale. A unified security architecture could retain specialist professional streams without requiring the symbolic architecture of three conventional armed services.

The strongest counterpoint is that military forces are designed for contingencies, not merely for the most common day-to-day tasks. Police may deal with crime every day, but the armed forces exist for rare events with catastrophic consequences. That argument is persuasive in countries where the military can credibly change the outcome of those contingencies. In New Zealand's case, the rare catastrophic event - major-power war - would immediately become an alliance problem. The marginal independent effect generated by a small conventional force must therefore be weighed against the daily effect obtainable from stronger surveillance, policing, cyber and resilience institutions.

The DCP's ambition to sustain land combat operations for at least 24 months shows the scale of the current strategic commitment.[9] It is a serious objective. It also reveals the opportunity cost. Sustained overseas combat requires personnel pipelines, ammunition stocks, logistics, maintenance, training and partner integration. A government that chooses this capability is not merely buying insurance; it is maintaining an expeditionary option. The public case for that option should be made openly rather than merged into a generic claim that New Zealand must 'defend itself'.

MARITIME SECURITY

The Frigate Debate and a Different Model of Sea Power

New Zealand is undeniably a maritime state. Almost all physical trade arrives or departs by sea, the country possesses a vast EEZ, and its strategic interests extend through the South Pacific and into the Southern Ocean. Any proposal to reduce conventional naval capability must therefore answer a demanding question: how would New Zealand protect its maritime interests without a traditional combat fleet?

The first step is to separate maritime security from naval warfare. Maritime security includes fisheries protection, customs enforcement, search and rescue, environmental protection, surveillance of foreign state activity, protection of critical undersea infrastructure and support to Pacific partners. Naval warfare includes anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, air defence, strike and operations inside a contested maritime battlespace. These missions overlap, but they are not the same. The most expensive capabilities are generally those required for the second category.

The current Maritime Fleet Renewal programme makes this trade-off concrete. Most of the RNZN fleet will reach end of life by the mid-2030s. The Government is investigating a modern, combat-capable fleet and has prioritised analysis of the Type 31 and Mogami classes in part because of interoperability with the United Kingdom and Australia. Replacement of the Anzac frigates is identified as indicative investment in the 2029-2039 period, and the Ministry states that no final decision has been made.[3] This means New Zealand still has an opportunity to decide whether a like-for-like combat replacement is strategically necessary.

The Type 31 and Mogami are credible modern warship designs. Their attraction lies in sensors, weapons, survivability, range and the ability to integrate with allied navies. If New Zealand's strategic goal is to send ships into high-threat task groups alongside Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan or the United States, a modern frigate is a logical platform. But that goal should be distinguished from the claim that frigates are necessary to 'patrol the EEZ'. A high-end combatant is an exceptionally expensive way to inspect a fishing vessel or maintain routine presence.

Persistence is the key metric. Crewed warships have maintenance cycles, training requirements and limited availability. They also require significant crews, and naval personnel numbers are constrained. By contrast, long-endurance uncrewed aerial systems can maintain wide-area surveillance; satellite services can provide repeated imagery and signals; autonomous surface vessels can remain at sea for extended periods; and smaller crewed patrol craft can be dispatched once a contact requires boarding, inspection or rescue. The result is a layered system in which expensive human presence is concentrated where decision and enforcement are necessary.

This is not speculative technology policy. The DCP itself envisages long-range uncrewed aerial vehicles for persistent maritime surveillance, uncrewed vertical-take-off aircraft for some maritime helicopter tasks, and uncrewed surface and subsurface vessels to help monitor the EEZ and support Pacific partners.[9] The argument advanced here is simply to follow that logic further. Rather than treating these technologies as force multipliers for a traditional fleet, New

Zealand could make them the primary surveillance architecture and design the crewed fleet around response rather than combat.

A future Border and Maritime Security Agency could operate a mixed fleet of offshore patrol vessels, fast response craft, aviation assets and autonomous systems. It would possess law-enforcement powers, fisheries expertise, customs liaison and a permanent intelligence cell. It could be explicitly civilian in legal status while still operating armed vessels where necessary. Panama's National Aeronaval Service and coast-guard models elsewhere demonstrate that armed maritime enforcement need not sit inside a conventional navy.

Such an agency would also simplify multi-agency coordination. At present maritime security responsibilities are distributed across Defence, Police, Customs, Fisheries, Maritime New Zealand and other agencies. A unified operational picture does not require bureaucratic merger of every function, but a single maritime command could integrate data, prioritise patrols and allocate the correct response asset. The system should be designed around the question 'what is happening at sea and who is best placed to act?' rather than around which service owns the vessel.

The most difficult capability to replace would be high-end anti-submarine and air-defence warfare. Removing frigates would reduce New Zealand's ability to contribute to allied naval combat and to escort shipping in a major conflict. That is a real loss, not an accounting trick. The policy question is whether this contribution justifies the lifecycle cost and institutional burden of maintaining a small high-end combat fleet. New Zealand cannot independently secure Pacific sea lanes against a major navy; in a major war, sea-lane defence would be dominated by allied naval and air power.

The strategic alternative is therefore specialisation. New Zealand would contribute maritime domain awareness, surveillance data, patrol and enforcement, hydrographic knowledge, logistics access, rescue capability and potentially mine-countermeasure or undersea-sensor expertise. These functions are useful in peace, competition and crisis. They can support allies without requiring New Zealand to maintain the full combat spectrum.

There is also a diplomatic advantage. A coast-guard-style security service is generally perceived differently from a navy. In the Pacific, where many governments are wary of militarisation and great-power competition, New Zealand could present maritime assistance as sovereignty support rather than strategic alignment. Training fisheries officers, supplying surveillance data, operating joint patrols and supporting disaster logistics may create more political capital than occasional visits by combat ships.

The test should therefore be outcome-based. If the desired outcome is continuous awareness, rapid law-enforcement response and Pacific partnership, New Zealand should build the cheapest, most persistent and most politically usable system that achieves those effects. If the desired outcome is coalition warfighting, then frigates may still be justified. What should end is the tendency to use routine maritime-security requirements as a catch-all justification for high-end combat platforms.

OPERATIONAL RECORD

What New Zealand Has Actually Used Its Armed Forces For

New Zealand's post-1945 operational record is frequently cited as proof of the value of the NZDF. It certainly proves that New Zealand military personnel have repeatedly been useful. It does not, by itself, prove that the same institutional structure is required for future security. The more revealing question is what each operation demanded and what political purpose the deployment served.

Korea was the clearest post-war example of conventional combat. New Zealand served from 1950 to 1957, with about 4,700 personnel in Kayforce and roughly 1,300 serving aboard RNZN frigates. Forty-five New Zealanders died while serving in the Korean commitment. The Navy escorted shipping and supported amphibious operations; the Army's 16 Field Regiment provided artillery and fought in a genuine high-intensity conflict.[7] Korea therefore demonstrates that New Zealand can make a serious military contribution. It also demonstrates the alliance logic underlying that contribution. Official history explicitly connects the Korean commitment with New Zealand's pursuit of a United States security commitment and the subsequent ANZUS Treaty.[7]

The Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation moved the problem from conventional war toward counter-insurgency and limited regional conflict. New Zealand forces operated within Commonwealth structures in Southeast

Asia, supporting a wider strategy that combined military operations with policing, intelligence, local administration and political measures. These campaigns matter because they show that even when soldiers are necessary, durable outcomes depend on institutions and local legitimacy rather than firepower alone.

Vietnam made the alliance dimension explicit. New Zealand's combat commitment remained relatively small, peaking at roughly 550 personnel. It included artillery, infantry, SAS personnel, medical teams and RNZAF support.[13] The political justification was tied closely to alliance credibility. Official New Zealand history records that concern about the consequences for ANZUS was a major factor in the decision to commit combat troops.[8] Whatever view is taken of the war itself, Vietnam illustrates the structural tendency of a small ally to deploy military forces partly to maintain relationships rather than because the battlefield directly determines homeland defence.

The post-Cold War record shifts further toward stabilisation. In East Timor, New Zealand made one of its most substantial modern deployments as part of INTERFET and subsequent United Nations operations. Security forces were necessary because violence and militia activity had created a dangerous environment. Yet the strategic purpose was not conquest or destruction of an enemy state. It was the establishment of public order, protection of civilians and creation of conditions in which political institutions could function. Once basic security was achieved, police, governance and development became decisive.

Bougainville and Solomon Islands reinforced this pattern. The Bougainville peace process placed unusual emphasis on unarmed monitoring and confidence-building. RAMSI in Solomon Islands combined police, military security, governance advisers and financial expertise. The crisis was fundamentally about the breakdown of law and order and state capacity. Military personnel provided an enabling security layer, but the long-term intervention was institutional. For a future Pacific strategy, this is a more relevant model than high-end naval warfare.

Afghanistan represents both the strengths and limits of expeditionary contribution. New Zealand deployed the SAS and maintained the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamyān. Personnel undertook dangerous operations and built substantial local relationships. Yet the strategic outcome of the war was determined by forces far beyond New Zealand's control. The Taliban returned to national power after the withdrawal of the international coalition in 2021. A small state's contribution can be tactically excellent and politically valued while remaining marginal to the ultimate trajectory of a large conflict.

Iraq followed a similar logic in a different form, with New Zealand concentrating on training rather than large-scale combat. Again, the contribution was principally a partnership function. Training missions can be valuable, but they do not require a broad national conventional force if the country chooses instead to maintain specialised instructors and security assistance teams.

Domestic disaster response provides the strongest public-interest argument for retaining substantial uniformed capacity. During the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, the 2016 Kaikoura earthquake and Cyclone Gabrielle in 2023, the NZDF provided manpower, logistics, aviation, engineering, command support, transport and communications. During Gabrielle, personnel supported national and regional coordination centres, conducted rescues and evacuations, moved critical supplies and helped restore services; NZDF also coordinated incoming Australian aircraft, Fijian engineers and United States satellite support.[14]

These are real capabilities, but they are not uniquely military capabilities. The distinctive military advantage is organisational readiness: people are already trained, equipped, deployable and accustomed to command under pressure. A future National Resilience and Emergency Corps would need to reproduce that readiness deliberately. It could not simply assume commercial contractors will appear after an earthquake. Framework contracts, mobilisation standards, reserve engineering units, stockpiles, deployable communications and regular exercises would be required.

The operational record therefore supports reform rather than abolition by neglect. New Zealand should identify the functions that repeatedly prove useful - logistics, engineering, surveillance, command and control, aviation, specialist security, training and humanitarian support - and preserve them. What it should question is whether those functions need to remain embedded in an institution whose organising purpose is conventional armed conflict.

A further lesson is that international influence does not require large force numbers. New Zealand's reputation has often derived from reliability, professionalism and the political credibility of participation. A police deployment, engineering

team, maritime-surveillance package or disaster-response task force can also demonstrate commitment. The diplomatic effect comes from showing up with capability that matters, not merely from wearing military insignia.

This distinction is essential if defence reform is to avoid caricature. The proposal is not that New Zealand should withdraw from East Timor-like missions because they were 'not our war'. It is that the instruments used should match the mission. Where law and order is the problem, police should lead. Where infrastructure is the problem, engineers should lead. Where disaster logistics is the problem, the state should maintain deployable logistics. Military forces should not be retained as an all-purpose national toolbox simply because they are convenient.

COMPARATIVE MODELS

Countries Without Traditional Armed Forces

International comparisons must be used carefully. No country is a direct analogue for New Zealand, and the absence of a standing military often rests on unique constitutional, alliance or geographic circumstances. Nevertheless, several states demonstrate that sovereignty, international standing and internal security do not require every government to maintain a conventional three-service armed force.

Iceland is the most strategically useful comparison because it is a developed island democracy with significant maritime interests and no standing army. It is a founding member of NATO and therefore relies heavily on collective defence. Its Icelandic Coast Guard performs maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, surveillance and other sovereign functions. Iceland's geography is very different from New Zealand's, and its NATO position provides a stronger formal defence guarantee than Wellington currently possesses. The relevant lesson is not that New Zealand can simply 'become Iceland'; it is that even inside the world's most prominent military alliance, a state can contribute strategically without maintaining a conventional army.

Costa Rica represents a different model. The country abolished its army after the 1948 civil war and constitutionally entrenched that decision. Security responsibilities were concentrated in police and public-security institutions. The country is often cited for redirecting resources toward education and social development. The causal relationship should not be romanticised - Costa Rica's development reflects many factors, and the country faces serious organised-crime challenges. Still, the constitutional choice demonstrates that a state can define national strength primarily through institutions rather than military power.

Panama offers a more operationally relevant example because it reorganised security after the Noriega period into specialised services rather than simply relying on ordinary police. The National Police, National Border Service and National Aeronaval Service divide internal, border and maritime responsibilities. Panama's close relationship with the United States and the special strategic significance of the Canal distinguish it from New Zealand, but the institutional design is instructive: border and maritime security can be organised as armed public-security functions outside a traditional defence ministry.

Mauritius similarly does not maintain a conventional standing military. Security functions are carried by police, a Special Mobile Force and a National Coast Guard. As an island state with maritime responsibilities, Mauritius shows that coast-guard-style structures can provide armed maritime enforcement and sovereign presence without a navy built for fleet combat. New Zealand's maritime scale is vastly larger, so its systems would need to be correspondingly more technologically enabled.

Several Pacific states also operate without conventional armed forces or with extremely limited defence structures. Their circumstances vary, and some rely heavily on external partners including Australia, New Zealand and the United States. The lesson for Wellington is not that regional states are defenseless. It is that Pacific security is commonly understood through a wider lens: policing, climate resilience, illegal fishing, transnational crime, disaster response, economic stability and governance often rank as more immediate priorities than interstate war.

The comparative evidence therefore supports three propositions. First, the conventional military is not a definitional requirement of statehood. Second, non-military models work best when backed by capable police, coast guard, intelligence and emergency institutions rather than by simple absence. Third, external relationships remain critical. A

country that removes conventional forces without strengthening institutions and partnerships would be taking risk rather than managing it.

New Zealand is better positioned than many demilitarised states to build such a model because it already possesses mature institutions, sophisticated intelligence relationships, advanced technology and deep ties with Australia. It also has a geographic buffer that few landlocked or frontier states enjoy. The transition would therefore not begin from zero; it would redistribute functions and resources across an already capable state.

The international examples also caution against simplistic claims about savings. Police and coast guard systems cost money. Advanced surveillance systems, resilient communications, emergency engineering capacity and cyber defence are not cheap. The fiscal benefit comes from avoiding the lifecycle cost of broad conventional warfighting capabilities, not from pretending security can be delivered at negligible cost.

For policy design, Iceland's combination of external defence reliance and sovereign maritime capability is likely more relevant than Costa Rica's constitutional pacifism. New Zealand could retain strong political and intelligence relationships with Australia and partners while concentrating its own investment on surveillance, law enforcement and resilience. This would represent strategic specialisation rather than ideological disarmament.

ALLIANCES AND TRADE

AUKUS, Australia and the Security-Economic Imbalance

Any serious proposal to restructure New Zealand's defence forces must confront alliance politics. New Zealand's security is not produced domestically alone. Five Eyes gives Wellington access to intelligence capabilities that a country of its size could never reproduce independently. Australia is the closest strategic partner and would be central to any major external defence contingency. The United States, United Kingdom and other partners provide technology, intelligence, training and diplomatic weight. These relationships are strategic assets.

The current Government intends to deepen this direction. The DCP describes the NZDF as a force multiplier with Australia and supports development of a more integrated Anzac force.[1] Maritime Fleet Renewal explicitly prioritises discussions around platforms already associated with the Royal Australian Navy and Royal Navy.[3] This is strategically coherent if New Zealand's objective is to maximise interoperability in coalition military operations.

The difficulty is that New Zealand's economic map is different from its security map. China is New Zealand's largest trading partner, with two-way trade above NZ\$41 billion in the year ending September 2025.[10] China is also important to education, tourism and investment. New Zealand therefore relies economically on a state that its principal security partners increasingly describe as their central strategic competitor. This does not make New Zealand neutral by necessity, but it raises the cost of automatic strategic alignment.

Previous ADG Consult analysis on AUKUS argued that New Zealand's circumstances differ from those of Australia and the United States. Australia has made a deliberate choice to become more deeply integrated with United States military strategy, including through nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS Pillar I. The United States is a global military power whose China policy reflects competition for technological, military and geopolitical primacy. New Zealand has no comparable ambition or capacity. Its primary interests are economic stability, maritime security, Pacific relationships, cyber resilience and sovereign decision-making.

A defence structure built primarily for allied interoperability can gradually import allied threat perceptions. This is not the same as alleging political control. New Zealand benefits greatly from allied intelligence and should continue to use it. But institutional integration naturally shapes doctrine, procurement, exercises, career incentives and assessments. If the majority of defence planning is undertaken with states preparing for high-end Indo-Pacific conflict, the resulting force will be designed for that environment.

The alternative is strategic selectivity. New Zealand could preserve Five Eyes, maintain bilateral security cooperation with Australia, support intelligence sharing and retain contingency planning while declining to maintain broad conventional capabilities for bloc competition. It would contribute in niches where national interests and allied interests clearly overlap: maritime domain awareness, cyber defence, search and rescue, undersea infrastructure protection, humanitarian assistance and Pacific stabilisation.

This approach would also support a more balanced China policy. China presents real security risks, including cyber activity, intelligence collection, foreign interference and the possibility of economic coercion. These risks should not be minimised. But none is effectively countered by two frigates or a small artillery force. They require counter-intelligence, cyber security, political resilience, investment screening, diversified trade and transparent institutions. A national-security architecture centred on these functions may be better suited to managing China-related risks than conventional rearmament.

There is, nevertheless, an alliance cost. Australia may judge a New Zealand decision to abandon conventional military capability as burden-shifting, especially if Canberra believes it would ultimately be expected to defend New Zealand in a major conflict. That concern is legitimate. Reform would therefore require an explicit new bargain with Australia. New Zealand would need to offer capabilities of real value - persistent regional surveillance, intelligence infrastructure, logistics access, cyber cooperation, Pacific policing, disaster response and perhaps financial contribution to shared systems - rather than simply relying on Australian force.

The objective should be burden specialisation rather than burden avoidance. New Zealand cannot match Australian military expenditure or force scale. It can, however, become exceptionally capable in areas Australia also needs. A South Pacific maritime-awareness network operated from New Zealand, combining satellite data, autonomous systems, undersea sensors and partner feeds, would have genuine alliance value. So would resilient ports, airfields, communications and emergency logistics.

The broader trade issue also demands diversification. Strategic neutrality cannot mean economic dependency on one market. A more independent foreign policy is credible only if New Zealand reduces vulnerability to coercive trade measures over time. That means expanding access in Southeast Asia, India, the European Union, the Gulf and other markets while maintaining the China relationship. Economic resilience should be treated as a core security policy, not as an issue separate from defence.

The most important principle is that alliance policy should follow national strategy, not substitute for it. New Zealand should decide what it needs to protect, what risks it is prepared to bear and what capabilities it can sustain. It should then negotiate alliance contributions around that model. Starting with interoperability and allowing it to dictate national force structure reverses the proper sequence.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

The Opportunity Cost of Conventional Defence

The economic case for reform is not that defence spending is inherently wasteful. Security is a legitimate public good, and sophisticated security systems are expensive. The question is comparative: which combination of investments produces the greatest reduction in national vulnerability for each dollar spent?

The 2025 DCP sets New Zealand on a path to more than 2 percent of GDP in defence spending within eight years, supported initially by NZ\$12 billion of commitments over four years, including NZ\$9 billion of new spending.[2] In a larger military power, a percentage-of-GDP target may be interpreted as a signal of alliance commitment and force readiness. For New Zealand, percentage targets can obscure the more important issue of marginal utility. Doubling the cost of a small conventional force does not necessarily double its strategic effect.

Major military platforms impose long lifecycle costs. Acquisition is only the beginning. Ships require crews, refits, weapons, fuel, docks, training pipelines and upgrades. Combat systems require secure communications, ammunition and interoperability. Army strike capabilities require ranges, stocks, maintenance and transport. Every capability has an institutional tail. Small fleets often have especially high unit costs because support infrastructure is spread across few platforms.

The opportunity cost should therefore be assessed across the whole security state. New Zealand Police face complex organised-crime, firearms, cyber and counter-terrorism demands. Customs and fisheries authorities must monitor extensive borders and maritime resources. NEMA and local emergency systems must prepare for earthquakes, floods, volcanic events and severe storms. Hospitals, telecommunications, electricity networks, ports and water infrastructure all create points of strategic vulnerability.

Health and education should not be used rhetorically as if every frigate could simply be converted into a hospital ward. Government budgets are more complex. However, the underlying allocation choice is real. A state has finite fiscal capacity. Additional permanent defence expenditure affects debt, taxation and spending elsewhere. If the security return from a conventional platform is low relative to another investment, opportunity cost is not ideological; it is basic public finance.

Education is especially relevant because future security is knowledge-intensive. Cyber defence, artificial intelligence, satellite analytics, engineering, intelligence analysis and critical-infrastructure protection depend on scarce technical talent. Investment in universities, vocational engineering, research and digital skills can serve economic and security objectives simultaneously. A national-security model built around technology would create stronger links between public security and the civilian innovation base.

Infrastructure resilience may be even more strategically important. New Zealand's isolation makes ports, fuel supply, undersea cables, airports and electricity networks critical. A conventional military cannot compensate for fragile civilian infrastructure. Hardening key nodes, establishing repair stocks, improving backup communications and ensuring rapid engineering mobilisation could increase national endurance during both natural disaster and strategic crisis.

Cyber investment offers another example. State-sponsored cyber operations can create economic and political effects without approaching New Zealand physically. Defensive cyber capability requires continuous monitoring, skilled personnel, secure architectures and cooperation with private operators. It produces value every day and in every crisis. The choice between additional cyber specialists and a marginal increment of conventional lethality should be subjected to the same rigorous strategic test.

The reform model would not eliminate security expenditure. Some savings from reduced military procurement would be absorbed by the new maritime, surveillance, police and resilience institutions. The purpose is not to promise a windfall. It is to redirect expenditure from capabilities with narrow wartime utility toward systems with broader peacetime, competitive and crisis value.

The strongest economic argument is therefore resilience. A healthy, skilled, connected and institutionally competent society is difficult to destabilise. National power begins with a functioning economy and trusted public institutions. New Zealand should be cautious about importing a defence-spending benchmark developed largely in the context of NATO-style conventional deterrence and treating it as an objective measure of national seriousness.

If a two-percent target remains politically desirable for alliance reasons, government could at minimum develop a broader national-security expenditure measure alongside it. Spending on cyber defence, maritime enforcement, strategic intelligence, civil defence infrastructure and deployable emergency capability should be visible in a whole-of-state security account. That would shift the public debate from 'how much is spent on Defence?' to 'how much is spent reducing national vulnerability?'

FUTURE MODEL

A New Zealand National Security Architecture

The proposed alternative requires more than transferring uniforms from one agency to another. If New Zealand were to move away from a conventional military, it would need a deliberately designed national security architecture with clear powers, readiness standards, command arrangements and funding. The central principle would be functional: capabilities should sit where they are most useful, not where historical tradition placed them.

At the political level, Cabinet would retain responsibility for national security through a strengthened National Security Committee and a permanent inter-agency secretariat with operational planning capability. The purpose would be to integrate domestic security, maritime awareness, intelligence, border policy, cyber defence, critical infrastructure and emergency management. A small country can achieve integration more easily than a large federal system; New Zealand should exploit that institutional advantage.

New Zealand Police would become the principal armed national security service on land. This would require expansion beyond ordinary policing. A National Security Command could integrate counter-terrorism, protective security, serious organised crime, foreign-interference investigations, armed response and specialist tactical teams. It would need a

larger intelligence-analysis capability and formal mechanisms for working with the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, Government Communications Security Bureau, Customs and financial regulators.

This does not imply militarising ordinary policing. The distinction between community policing and national security should remain clear. Specialist national units can exist inside a civilian police organisation without turning routine policing into a paramilitary function. Rules of engagement, judicial oversight and accountability would remain civilian and law-based.

A Border and Maritime Security Agency would become the principal sovereign presence at sea. It could combine operational elements drawn from the Navy, Customs, fisheries enforcement and maritime safety while maintaining separate regulatory expertise where necessary. Its fleet would prioritise offshore patrol vessels, fast response craft, boarding capability, hydrography, rescue and autonomous surveillance rather than high-end fleet combat.

A National Surveillance Command would integrate the information layer. This could operate long-range UAVs, task commercial satellite providers, fuse automatic identification system data, radar, acoustic sensing and intelligence reporting, and operate autonomous surface or subsurface systems. The DCP's existing interest in uncrewed technology provides a natural starting point.[9] The command should be technologically open rather than platform-centric, acquiring services commercially where that is cheaper than owning systems.

Aviation would remain important. P-8A maritime-surveillance aircraft or their eventual successors provide capabilities that unmanned systems may not fully replace in the near term. Heavy and medium transport is also essential for disaster relief, Pacific access and national resilience. These assets could be operated by a National Aviation Service with a hybrid workforce of uniformed security personnel and civilian specialists, or retained as a small air service without broader combat-air ambitions.

A National Resilience and Emergency Corps would preserve the most useful military support functions: deployable engineers, bridging, water purification, field communications, logistics coordination, medical support and heavy transport. It would sit alongside NEMA rather than compete with it. Its personnel could combine a small permanent cadre with a much larger technical reserve drawn from engineering firms, utilities, telecommunications companies, transport operators and local government.

Commercial contracting would be a central feature but must be designed for crisis, not ordinary procurement. Framework agreements should specify mobilisation times, equipment availability, priority access, insurance arrangements and workforce obligations. Contractors would exercise with government annually. The state would maintain strategic stockpiles and own niche equipment that the commercial market cannot guarantee after a major earthquake or regional disaster.

A small Armed Response Group could be retained for tasks where military-grade force remains necessary. This might include counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, explosive ordnance disposal, high-risk maritime boarding and selected overseas protection missions. The unit could incorporate elements of current special operations, military police and explosive-ordnance expertise. Its existence would recognise that abandoning a broad conventional military does not remove the need for tightly controlled high-end force.

The intelligence community would become even more important. Strategic warning is the first line of defence for a demilitarised state. New Zealand would need to preserve Five Eyes access while investing in independent analytical capability so that national assessments are not entirely derivative of larger partners. Intelligence priorities should include foreign interference, cyber activity, transnational crime, maritime behaviour, Pacific political stability and threats to critical infrastructure.

Critical infrastructure protection would be institutionalised as a national security function. Ports, airports, energy networks, telecommunications, cloud infrastructure, water systems and undersea cables would require risk standards, redundancy requirements and tested recovery plans. Government should know which private assets are essential to national survival and under what legal authority they can be prioritised during crisis.

The model would also need a reserve concept. New Zealand's small population makes a large permanent security workforce expensive, but a technically skilled reserve could provide surge capacity. Cyber specialists, engineers, medical personnel, logisticians, pilots, maritime crews and communications experts could maintain civilian careers

while training periodically for national mobilisation. This would update the traditional military reserve idea for a resilience-focused state.

The transition would be organisationally difficult because service identities are deeply embedded. Personnel conditions, pensions, rank equivalencies, veterans' recognition and career pathways would require careful treatment. Many current NZDF members could transfer directly into new maritime, aviation, emergency, intelligence and armed-response organisations. The reform should be presented as reallocation of national service rather than abolition of service.

Most importantly, the new system would need measurable outputs. Maritime contacts identified and resolved, cyber incidents contained, response times, days of emergency sustainment, critical infrastructure recovery times and Pacific assistance capacity are more useful metrics than simple platform counts. Security policy should be judged by effects.

PACIFIC SECURITY

Why Policing and Resilience May Deliver More Influence

New Zealand's regional responsibilities are frequently used to justify military capability. The Pacific is indeed central to New Zealand's security. Instability, disaster, transnational crime or strategic competition among Pacific Island countries can affect migration, trade, diplomatic relationships and the security of New Zealand's Realm countries. The question is what form of assistance is most relevant.

Most Pacific security challenges are not conventional military threats. Governments are more commonly concerned with illegal fishing, narcotics trafficking, domestic policing, public-order capacity, disaster response, climate resilience, maritime surveillance, infrastructure vulnerability and governance. Great-power competition is real, but it is layered onto these local priorities rather than replacing them.

New Zealand therefore has an opportunity to specialise in civilian security partnership. Police advisers, investigators, forensic specialists, border officers, cyber teams, financial-crime investigators and maritime enforcement personnel can help strengthen institutions that operate every day. This creates durable capability in partner states rather than episodic military presence.

RAMSI remains a useful reference. Military security supported the mission, but the restoration of policing, justice, finance and public administration was central to the long-term stabilisation effort. Future Pacific interventions are likely to require the same blend. A police-led New Zealand model could deploy with armed protection when necessary while keeping the institutional centre of gravity civilian.

Disaster response is another major area of influence. Pacific states face cyclones, volcanic events, tsunamis, flooding and infrastructure shocks. New Zealand can provide airlift, engineering, satellite communications, emergency medical teams, water systems and logistics coordination. These capabilities generate political trust precisely because they are useful regardless of geopolitical alignment.

Maritime awareness can become a signature regional capability. New Zealand could operate a shared South Pacific surveillance network and provide partner governments with near-real-time information on suspicious fishing, trafficking or environmental incidents. The system could combine national sensors with commercial satellite data and partner inputs. This would support sovereignty without requiring Pacific states to purchase expensive surveillance platforms.

A more civilian New Zealand security posture may also be diplomatically advantageous in a region sensitive to militarisation and nuclear history. It would distinguish Wellington from larger powers competing for military access and strategic presence. New Zealand's comparative advantage has often been that it is perceived as smaller, closer and more pragmatic. A police-resilience model would reinforce that identity.

There would still be situations where armed military force is necessary. An armed insurgency, evacuation under fire or protection of critical infrastructure during severe disorder could exceed police capacity. New Zealand would need partner arrangements for escalation and could retain a small armed-response capability. The policy shift is therefore about the centre of gravity, not pretending force is never necessary.

Pacific engagement also strengthens New Zealand's own security. Training partner police, improving border systems and sharing maritime information pushes detection outward. Transnational crime intercepted in the Pacific is less likely to reach New Zealand. Stronger regional disaster systems reduce the need for large emergency deployments later. Capacity building is therefore forward security in a form better matched to regional realities.

This approach would require long-term funding and relationships rather than short deployment cycles. Police and technical personnel would need language, cultural and regional expertise. New Zealand should build Pacific careers inside the security system just as militaries build operational specialisations. Institutional memory matters.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

The Strongest Case for Keeping a Military

The case against the proposal begins with uncertainty. Security planning must account for low-probability, high-consequence events, and the future is not reliably predictable. A force structure designed only around today's likely threats may be dangerously inadequate if the region changes. Great-power conflict, coercion against Pacific states or attacks on maritime trade could create demands that are difficult to rebuild after capability has been abandoned.

This is the strongest argument for retaining a military. Military competence takes years to develop. Ships cannot be purchased and crews trained instantly. Artillery, combined-arms command, naval warfare and military logistics are perishable institutional skills. Once removed, they are expensive to recreate. A decision to abandon conventional capability therefore creates path dependency.

The response is that New Zealand already accepts path dependency. Ending the air combat force removed an option that cannot be quickly restored. Yet government did so because opportunity cost and strategic assessment favoured other capabilities. The relevant question is not whether capability is difficult to rebuild; it is whether the probability and value of needing it justify the permanent cost of keeping it.

A second argument concerns Australia. If New Zealand deliberately reduces military capability while expecting Australia to provide external defence, Canberra could reasonably view the arrangement as free-riding. This could damage the alliance and reduce Australian willingness to prioritise New Zealand interests. Reform therefore cannot be unilateral burden shedding. It must involve a negotiated specialisation bargain under which New Zealand provides capabilities Australia values and accepts defined responsibilities in shared regional security.

A third argument is deterrence. Even a small force can raise the cost of coercion and signal political will. Frigates, armed land forces and military aircraft create options and uncertainty. Removing them could invite pressure. The limitation is credibility: a deterrent works only if it can impose meaningful cost. Against non-state threats, police and intelligence may be more credible. Against a major state, New Zealand's deterrent is overwhelmingly alliance response and political consequence rather than the independent combat power of the NZDF.

China is often the practical focus of this concern. China's military modernisation and growing Pacific engagement have altered regional calculations. A more assertive China could seek access agreements, intelligence advantage or political influence in the South Pacific. New Zealand must be prepared for that environment. But the correct response may be stronger Pacific relationships, counter-intelligence, maritime awareness and economic resilience rather than an attempt to match Chinese military power.

A fourth argument is that armed forces provide national mobilisation capacity. They create disciplined organisations able to operate during disaster, maintain communications and provide command under stress. A civilian model may become fragmented, overly bureaucratic or dependent on private firms. This criticism is valid unless reform explicitly recreates readiness. The proposed National Resilience and Emergency Corps exists precisely because NEMA coordination alone does not generate deployable capability.

A fifth argument is diplomatic influence. Military deployments provide access to exercises, planning forums and defence relationships. Officers build networks that may matter in crisis. Removing conventional forces could reduce New Zealand's seat at important tables. The response is not to deny the value, but to ask whether participation can be maintained through intelligence, maritime, cyber, police and specialist security relationships. Some forums would close; others could deepen.

There is also a national identity argument. The NZDF carries traditions connected to New Zealand's history and to Maori and Pakeha service. Abolition may be experienced as rejection of that heritage. Reform should therefore preserve ceremonial units, memorial responsibilities, museums, veterans' institutions and honours. Institutional change does not require historical erasure.

Finally, the transition itself carries risk. New agencies can duplicate functions, lose expertise or become captured by bureaucratic rivalry. The current NZDF has coherent command and mature systems. Reform should proceed only if government is prepared to invest in organisational design and maintain clear accountability. A badly executed civilianisation could produce less security at higher cost.

These counterarguments mean the proposal should not be treated as self-evidently superior. It is a strategic wager. The paper's position is that the existing model is also a wager - one that assumes New Zealand will obtain sufficient security value from increasingly expensive conventional capabilities and alliance integration. The correct debate is between competing risk portfolios, not between seriousness and irresponsibility.

STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Three Paths for the Next Twenty Years

The first option is to continue implementing the 2025 DCP broadly as designed. New Zealand would rebuild combat capability, increase strike options, deepen integration with Australia, acquire a replacement naval combat fleet and use uncrewed technologies as force multipliers. This provides continuity, alliance reassurance and the widest set of military options. Its weakness is cost and dependence: even after substantial investment, New Zealand remains a small force whose high-end combat effect depends heavily on partners.

The second option is a reduced military model. New Zealand would retain Army, Navy and Air Force but abandon some high-end capabilities, perhaps replacing frigates with simpler patrol vessels and reducing expeditionary land ambitions. This lowers cost and preserves military identity. Its weakness is institutional inefficiency: three services would remain while capability narrows, potentially producing a force too small for serious combat but still expensive to sustain.

The third option is the national security transformation proposed in this paper. New Zealand would phase out broad conventional warfighting capability and reorganise around police, intelligence, maritime sovereignty, aviation and surveillance, cyber security, emergency response and Pacific assistance. It would negotiate new specialisation arrangements with Australia and other partners while retaining selected armed-response capabilities.

This paper prefers the third option because it aligns resources with the threats most likely to affect New Zealand directly and because it exploits technological change. It also offers greater strategic flexibility in managing the imbalance between Western security relationships and Asian trade exposure. The cost is reduced capacity to participate in coalition warfare and greater reliance on partners for external defence.

The choice should be made explicitly. A hybrid policy that publicly claims independent defence while privately relying on allies, and simultaneously buys expensive platforms primarily for coalition relevance, obscures the real strategic bargain. New Zealand should state what it is prepared to defend itself, what it expects partners to provide and what contributions it offers in return.

TRANSITION PATHWAY

A Managed Ten-to-Fifteen-Year Reform

A transition of this scale should take at least ten years and probably closer to fifteen. Sudden abolition would waste assets, lose personnel and damage relationships. The reform should instead be aligned with existing equipment retirement cycles, particularly the approaching decisions on maritime fleet renewal. The key principle is to avoid locking the country into another forty-year generation of conventional capability before the strategic question has been resolved.

The first phase would be analytical and legislative. Government would commission a National Security Design Review independent of the existing Defence Capability Plan process. Its mandate would be to define required national security

effects without assuming that they belong to the NZDF. It would map functions, legal powers, workforce, infrastructure and current expenditure across Defence, Police, intelligence agencies, Customs, fisheries, NEMA and critical-infrastructure regulators.

During this phase, procurement decisions that are difficult to reverse should be tested against the alternative model. Necessary sustainment of existing assets should continue, but commitment to a replacement frigate class should wait until the review has determined whether coalition naval combat remains a core national requirement.

The second phase would establish the new institutions. A Maritime and Border Security Agency and National Surveillance Command could be created first because their functions overlap strongly with existing sovereignty tasks. Selected Navy and Air Force personnel could transfer with protected conditions. Existing offshore patrol and surveillance assets would move under the new command while combat vessels remained temporarily within the RNZN.

New Zealand Police would expand specialist national-security capability in parallel. Recruitment would need to grow, particularly in intelligence, cyber crime, organised crime, protective security and tactical response. The goal would not be to push ordinary constables into military functions but to build national specialist units inside a civilian law-enforcement framework.

The third phase would create the National Resilience and Emergency Corps. Army engineers, logistics and communications specialists would form the initial cadre. Reserve structures would be redesigned to include civilian technical specialists. Framework contracts with construction, transport, aviation, telecommunications and utility companies would be exercised regularly.

The fourth phase would address remaining conventional military functions. Special operations and explosive-ordnance capabilities could be retained inside an Armed Response Group. The future of artillery, armoured combat and frigate warfare would be determined by whether government still sees a compelling independent or alliance requirement. Assets would be retired as they reached economic end of life rather than destroyed prematurely.

Alliance diplomacy would run throughout the transition. Australia should be engaged from the beginning, not informed after decisions are made. New Zealand would need to offer a clear package of replacement contributions: regional surveillance, intelligence infrastructure, cyber support, Pacific policing, logistics access, resilient airfields and ports, and emergency-response capability. The goal would be to redefine interoperability around information and support rather than identical combat platforms.

A funding rule should protect the new institutions from becoming the cheap option. Savings from cancelled conventional procurement should be ring-fenced initially for security transformation, technology and resilience. Otherwise reform risks becoming simple austerity and producing a hollow security system.

The final phase would be constitutional and symbolic. The NZDF as a single institution could be dissolved or transformed into a small residual Armed Service depending on the capabilities retained. Veterans' rights, honours, memorial responsibilities and historical identities would remain protected. The state should make clear that the change reflects strategic adaptation, not repudiation of service.

Success should be measured against concrete resilience standards. New Zealand should be able to maintain a continuous maritime picture, identify and intercept suspicious contacts, sustain government communications after major infrastructure failure, deploy engineering and logistics support domestically within hours, support a significant Pacific disaster, recover critical networks rapidly and provide intelligence that partners value. If the reformed system cannot meet those standards, it is not an improvement.

CURRENT POLICY CHOICE

The Government's Case for Rebuilding Defence - and Why It Should Be Challenged

A persuasive reform paper must start by recognising that the current Government has a coherent case. The 2025 Defence Capability Plan is not simply a return to Cold War thinking or a nostalgic attempt to purchase military prestige.

It is an effort to respond to an international environment that officials assess as the most unstable and challenging in decades. The plan seeks a force able to deter, operate in dangerous environments for extended periods, integrate more closely with Australia and exploit uncrewed systems, space technologies and improved intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.[1][9] In other words, government has already recognised that future security is increasingly technological and that a small force needs multipliers rather than mass alone.

The critical disagreement in this paper is therefore not over whether the world is becoming more difficult. It is over the inference drawn from that difficulty. The Government concludes that strategic uncertainty requires a stronger military able to contribute more credibly to combat alongside partners. This paper concludes that the same uncertainty makes broad conventional capability less attractive for a state that cannot generate strategic mass. The more complex the environment becomes, the more important it is for New Zealand to concentrate on functions where it can achieve independent effect rather than on capabilities whose decisive utility appears only inside a much larger allied force.

The DCP's language is revealing. It seeks enhanced lethality and deterrent effect, increased maritime strike, sustained combat operations and a more integrated Anzac force. These objectives are not simply about defending Auckland, Wellington or the country's EEZ. They are about making New Zealand a more credible military participant in a regional coalition. That may be strategically desirable, but it should be debated as such. A public discussion framed around 'defending New Zealand' risks obscuring that the practical military product being purchased is interoperability and contribution.

There are benefits to this approach. A country that contributes meaningful combat capability may gain greater access to planning, technology and political influence. Australia may be more willing to treat New Zealand as a serious defence partner. The United States and United Kingdom may provide deeper integration and intelligence. In an extreme contingency, these relationships could be decisive. The difficulty is that such benefits are indirect and difficult to quantify, while the financial and opportunity costs are immediate.

The case for conventional defence also assumes that maintaining a minimum viable military now preserves options that would be impossible to regenerate later. This is true. Naval warfare, artillery, combined-arms command and sophisticated operational logistics take years to master. But an option has value only if there is a credible scenario in which government intends to use it. New Zealand should therefore identify those scenarios explicitly. If the answer is participation in an Australian-led or United States-led high-intensity conflict, that should be acknowledged. If government is unwilling to articulate such a contingency, then the strategic rationale for sustained warfighting capability becomes weaker.

The DCP also describes whole-of-government roles such as countering transnational organised crime, illegal fishing, narcotics and people smuggling, search and rescue, disaster relief and counter-terrorism.[9] These are genuine security tasks, but they illustrate the institutional problem. Because the NZDF already owns ships, aircraft, logistics and trained personnel, almost any national emergency can be used as evidence for retaining a military. This risks circular reasoning: the military is useful because it owns capabilities, and it owns capabilities because it is useful.

A first-principles review would instead separate mission from institution. Search and rescue requires aircraft, ships, coordination and trained crews. It does not require a navy as such. Disaster relief requires engineers, communications, heavy transport and command. It does not require an army as such. Maritime awareness requires sensors, aircraft, satellites and analysis. It does not require a combat fleet as such. Once the function is separated from the historical owner, government can compare delivery models honestly.

The strategic challenge is therefore not to prove the current DCP irrational. It is to prove that an alternative architecture could provide equal or greater security with lower exposure to the structural weaknesses of a small conventional force. That requires the alternative to be detailed, funded and operationally credible. A slogan about 'abolishing the military' would fail this test. A properly designed national-security state might not.

LAND SECURITY

The Army Question in Greater Detail

The New Zealand Army is often the easiest service to misunderstand in this debate. It is neither a token ceremonial force nor a miniature version of the Australian Army. It is a professional light-to-medium land force with infantry, artillery, armoured mobility, engineers, logistics, communications, intelligence and special operations capability. Its personnel train for combat, and the Army retains the 105 mm L119 gun, NZLAV armoured vehicles, Bushmasters and modern support fleets.[5][12] The criticism developed here is therefore about scale and strategic purpose, not about whether the Army can fight.

In a coalition context, the Army's scale can be an advantage. A well-trained company, battalion group, artillery battery, engineer detachment or special operations element can plug into a larger formation and provide useful capability without New Zealand carrying the full cost of theatre-level logistics, air defence, aviation and intelligence. This is exactly what interoperability is designed to achieve. The DCP's concept of a force multiplier with Australia formalises that logic.[1]

For independent national defence, however, the same structure is less convincing. A state-level attack would require the Army to operate inside a joint defensive system. Ground units would need protected command networks, counter-drone capability, air defence, long-range fires, engineering, reserve manpower, sustainment, medical evacuation and control of key infrastructure. New Zealand could build some of these capabilities, but the cost of creating a balanced force would be disproportionate to the probability that it could operate independently for long.

The absence of tanks is sometimes cited as evidence that the Army is not a serious combat force, but that is an imprecise criticism. Tanks are not inherently necessary for every country's defence, and New Zealand's terrain and strategic posture do not automatically demand heavy armoured formations. The more important issue is that the Army cannot generate a self-contained combined-arms system at meaningful national scale. Its NZLAVs provide protected mobility and direct fire; its artillery provides indirect fire; its engineers and logistics are real. The force remains dependent on partners for many of the enablers that determine survivability in modern high-intensity war.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated how rapidly artillery, drones, electronic warfare, air defence, precision fires and mass logistics consume resources. A small inventory can be tactically competent yet strategically exhausted quickly. Maintaining a credible conventional land force therefore requires not only platforms but ammunition depth, repair capacity, training pipelines and a large mobilisation base. The fiscal question is whether New Zealand should attempt to build this depth for a contingency in which allied intervention would be indispensable anyway.

The Army's domestic value is different. Engineers, logistics units, communications specialists and disciplined manpower are highly useful during disasters. The Kaikoura earthquake demonstrated the value of rapid reconnaissance, helicopter evacuation, ship support and ground logistics; Cyclone Gabrielle similarly required communications, engineers, transport and command support.[14][21] These functions are among the strongest reasons for preserving deployable state capacity.

Yet their utility also suggests a reform path. Engineers could form the core of a National Resilience Corps. Logistics units could become a government strategic-mobility service. Communications specialists could support resilient national networks. Reserve personnel could be recruited explicitly for disaster and infrastructure support rather than as part-time combat soldiers. The capabilities would remain while the institutional purpose changed.

Infantry is more difficult to translate. New Zealand may still require armed personnel for protection of critical infrastructure, assistance to police during extreme security events, evacuation operations overseas and selected Pacific stabilisation missions. A National Security Guard could retain a modest number of highly trained armed companies with protected mobility. Their doctrine would emphasise security, protection, evacuation and support to civilian authority rather than brigade-scale warfare.

Special operations should almost certainly be retained in some form. Counter-terrorism, hostage rescue and high-risk reconnaissance can generate strategic effects out of proportion to force size. The New Zealand Special Air Service also provides expertise that cannot be regenerated quickly. A restructured force could retain and expand special operations as a national capability reporting through a security command while removing the assumption that it must sit inside a larger conventional land force.

One concern is career development. High-end small units often depend on a broader service to provide recruits, command experience, instructors and institutional depth. A stand-alone security force could become narrow or brittle. This means a transition would need deliberate career pathways, exchanges with Australia and partner forces, and a robust training establishment. The alternative is not automatically cheaper merely because it is smaller.

Another concern is mobilisation. A traditional Army provides a framework around which a larger wartime force could theoretically be built. If New Zealand dismantles that framework, reconstitution would become harder. The policy answer depends on how credible the mobilisation scenario is. A country of New Zealand's size would need years, external equipment and allied assistance to create a large modern army in any event. Strategic warning and partner planning may therefore matter more than retaining a small skeleton of every capability.

The core assessment is that New Zealand should retain land security capacity but question whether it needs a conventional Army as the organising institution. Protected mobility, engineering, logistics, special operations, explosive ordnance disposal, communications and a limited armed security force all have continuing value. The burden of proof should fall on capabilities whose principal purpose is sustained expeditionary land combat.

AIR AND SPACE SECURITY

From an Air Force to an Aviation, Surveillance and Space Service

The RNZAF is already closer to the alternative model than the other services. Since 2001 it has operated without a fighter force and therefore without an independent air-combat mission. Its major functions are maritime surveillance, strategic and tactical transport, helicopter operations, training, search and rescue and support to other agencies. In practical terms, the Air Force's greatest sovereign value lies in mobility and information rather than air superiority.

The P-8A Poseidon fleet illustrates both the value and the ambiguity of current capability. The aircraft provides outstanding maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and intelligence capability. It can contribute to allied military operations, but it can also monitor fisheries, shipping and suspicious activity across large ocean areas. Its usefulness does not depend on New Zealand maintaining a conventional Navy. Indeed, in a surveillance-led maritime model the P-8A or a future equivalent would become even more central.

Transport aircraft are equally important. New Zealand's geographic isolation creates a permanent requirement for strategic lift. Government needs to move people and equipment around the country, into the Pacific and occasionally over intercontinental distances. Humanitarian response, evacuation and Antarctic support all depend on air mobility. These are sovereign capabilities and should survive any defence restructuring.

Helicopter capability has similar dual value. NH90s and other rotary-wing assets can move personnel, conduct rescue, support disaster relief and operate from austere locations. The question is organisational, not operational: does this capability need to sit inside an Air Force designed as a military service, or could it form part of a National Aviation Service with security and emergency functions?

The rise of unmanned systems strengthens the case for redesign. Long-endurance UAVs can monitor maritime approaches for far longer than crewed aircraft and at lower operating cost. Small drones can support disaster reconnaissance, border patrol and tactical security. Uncrewed vertical-take-off systems may replace some shipborne helicopter tasks, an option already identified in the DCP.[9] A future aviation organisation could therefore mix a small number of high-capability crewed aircraft with a much larger unmanned fleet.

Space is becoming equally important. New Zealand does not need to own a constellation of military satellites to use space effectively. Commercial providers can supply optical imagery, synthetic aperture radar, communications and maritime data. Government can purchase access, develop analytic capability and use domestic launch infrastructure where appropriate. The strategic value lies in data integration, not necessarily ownership of expensive orbital systems.

A National Surveillance Command could therefore absorb much of what is now treated as military aerospace capability. It would integrate crewed aircraft, UAVs, satellite data, ground radar and intelligence feeds. Operators could include uniformed security personnel and civilians. The command's primary output would be a persistent national and regional operating picture rather than combat air power.

Airspace defence remains the principal gap. New Zealand currently lacks fighters, so this is already a dependency. The country could improve ground-based surveillance, secure air-traffic management and develop protocols for allied air support during extreme contingencies. The policy choice is whether to accept this dependency openly or attempt eventually to restore combat aviation at very high cost. The historical decision since 2001 indicates that successive governments have already accepted substantial dependence.

A more resilient approach might invest instead in airfield dispersal, runway repair, fuel redundancy, hardened communications and rapid allied access. In a crisis, the ability to host partner aircraft may provide more strategic effect than owning a tiny fighter fleet that cannot sustain prolonged operations. Iceland's model of host-nation support and allied air policing demonstrates this logic in a formal NATO setting.[16][22]

The legal and cultural transition would still matter. Aviation safety, military operating procedures and command responsibilities have developed inside RNZAF structures. They should not be casually discarded. A transformed Aviation and Surveillance Service would need to preserve standards, technical trades and disciplined operational culture. Reform should remove unnecessary military missions, not lower professional standards.

New Zealand's future air power should therefore be understood as reach, awareness and access. The country needs to see far across the ocean, move quickly into the Pacific, support domestic crises and provide partners with useful information. None of those objectives requires a traditional combat Air Force.

THREATS BELOW WAR

Policing, Intelligence, Cyber and Foreign Interference

The argument for a police-led security model becomes strongest in the grey zone between peace and war. States increasingly compete through cyber operations, intelligence activity, covert influence, economic pressure, technology access and the exploitation of criminal or commercial networks. These actions can damage sovereignty without producing a military target that a frigate, artillery battery or infantry company can usefully engage.

Foreign interference is principally an intelligence and law-enforcement problem. The state must identify covert relationships, illicit funding, intimidation, espionage and attempts to influence political or diaspora communities. Responses involve investigation, attribution, prosecution where possible, diplomatic action and protective-security measures. Military capability may provide contextual intelligence, but the operational tools are civilian.

Cyber threats are even more clearly distributed across society. Critical systems are often privately owned. A cyber campaign may target banks, hospitals, logistics firms, telecommunications, government databases and media simultaneously. Defence against such activity requires partnerships with companies, regulatory standards, threat intelligence, incident-response teams and a deep pool of technical specialists. It cannot be confined to a defence network.

Organised crime has strategic significance because transnational networks can undermine communities, corrupt institutions and exploit borders. Narcotics trafficking, money laundering, illegal firearms and maritime smuggling require long investigations and international police cooperation. The DCP lists countering transnational organised crime as a whole-of-government objective, but the daily lead is naturally Police, Customs and other civilian agencies.[9]

The proposed National Security Command inside Police would therefore be substantially larger than existing specialist structures. It would include intelligence analysts, digital forensics, financial investigators, counter-terrorism teams, protective security and armed tactical response. It would operate nationally but remain subject to civilian law, courts and oversight.

A central concern is militarisation of policing. The purpose of reform is not to turn New Zealand Police into an army. Routine community policing should remain institutionally distinct from national security functions, and use-of-force standards should remain based on law enforcement. Specialist tactical units would be tightly controlled and deployed only to threats beyond ordinary policing.

Intelligence coordination would also need strengthening. New Zealand benefits from Five Eyes but should expand independent collection and analysis in the Pacific, maritime domain and economic-security fields. A smaller

conventional military makes warning more important because the country would have fewer kinetic options once a crisis begins. Strategic intelligence becomes the mechanism for buying time.

Economic security should be integrated into this system. Foreign investment in critical infrastructure, dependence on single suppliers, control of strategic data and exposure to coercive trade practices all affect national autonomy. Treasury, foreign affairs, intelligence, regulators and industry need a shared picture of vulnerabilities. A National Security Council should treat these issues with the same seriousness traditionally reserved for military readiness.

Biosecurity is another example. New Zealand's economy depends heavily on agriculture, and deliberate or accidental biological incursions can have strategic economic effects. The agencies protecting borders, food systems and animal health form part of national security whether or not they carry weapons. Resilience planning should therefore include biological threats and supply-chain continuity.

The broader point is that modern security is networked. Threats exploit the seams between agencies and between public and private sectors. The conventional military model organises around domains - land, sea and air - while many contemporary threats cross legal, financial, digital and social domains. A national-security architecture should be designed around integration rather than service boundaries.

DETAILED COMPARISONS

What Iceland, Costa Rica, Panama and Mauritius Actually Teach

International comparisons become useful only when the conditions behind them are examined. Iceland is not secure simply because it lacks an army. It is secure because it sits inside NATO, has a bilateral defence agreement with the United States, operates strategic surveillance infrastructure, provides host-nation support and is geographically important to allied planning. NATO itself notes that Iceland has no armed forces but maintains a Coast Guard, national police, air-defence system and voluntary peacekeeping capability; allied air policing has been conducted periodically since 2008.[16][22]

This is highly relevant to New Zealand because it demonstrates that contribution can be asymmetric. Iceland does not provide a conventional land force to NATO, yet NATO describes it as a valuable ally because of location, surveillance, infrastructure and host-nation support. New Zealand could pursue a similar logic with Australia and Five Eyes: not identical capability, but valuable capability.

There are important differences. Iceland's treaty protection is more explicit, and its location in the North Atlantic gives allies a direct strategic interest in its defence. New Zealand would need to ensure Australia and other partners retained equivalent political incentives. A security model that assumes external help without negotiating that help would be irresponsible.

Costa Rica's example is more political than military. Article 12 of the 1949 Constitution prohibits the army as a permanent institution and provides for police forces necessary to maintain public order.[23] Official Costa Rican legal material explicitly links abolition with civilian government, education, health and culture.[24] The lesson is not that military budgets automatically cause poor social outcomes. It is that institutional demilitarisation can become part of a durable national identity and resource allocation model.

Costa Rica also demonstrates limits. The country must still confront organised crime and narcotics trafficking, and police capability has had to grow. This reinforces the argument that abolition without strong internal-security institutions is incomplete. New Zealand would need to invest heavily in police, intelligence and border agencies rather than treating them as inexpensive substitutes.

Panama is relevant because its post-military Public Forces are functionally differentiated. Police, border and aeronaval services allow the state to maintain armed security, protect frontiers and operate at sea without restoring a conventional armed force. New Zealand's geography is very different, but a Border and Maritime Security Agency would follow the same functional principle.

Panama also highlights the role of the United States. External strategic context matters. A state without a conventional military often relies on relationships, geography or international legal arrangements that reduce invasion risk. New

Zealand already relies on relationships for high-end air defence and would rely heavily on partners in any major war even under the current DCP. Reform would make that reliance more explicit rather than create it from nothing.

Mauritius provides an island comparison. Its security arrangements rely on police structures, the Special Mobile Force and National Coast Guard. The model is appropriate to routine maritime enforcement and internal security but is not designed to fight a major navy. This is precisely the distinction New Zealand must confront: whether its principal purpose is sovereign maritime administration or participation in naval warfare.

Small Pacific states add another dimension. Many have no conventional military because their threat environment, resources and political priorities do not justify one. They depend on policing, maritime surveillance and partners. New Zealand's obligations are greater and its resources larger, so it should not copy them. But their security priorities - climate resilience, illegal fishing, disaster relief and law enforcement - are the environment in which New Zealand most often operates regionally.

The comparative cases also show that demilitarisation is easiest when a state has predictable institutions and low coup risk. In countries where the military has historically intervened in politics, abolishing or subordinating armed forces can have democratic significance. New Zealand does not face that problem. Its military is firmly under civilian control. The case for reform must therefore rest on strategic efficiency, not regime security.

Another lesson is that coast guards and public security forces can themselves become substantial organisations. They require vessels, aircraft, armed teams, command centres and training. If New Zealand created a Maritime Security Agency capable of operating throughout the South Pacific, it would likely be a major uniformed service. The difference would be mission, law and doctrine rather than the absence of uniforms.

The comparative evidence therefore supports a tailored model. Iceland suggests external defence plus sovereign surveillance; Costa Rica demonstrates enduring civilian security identity; Panama shows functional armed public services; Mauritius shows a maritime law-enforcement model. New Zealand could combine elements of all four while retaining its own intelligence relationships and Pacific responsibilities.

LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

What Institutional Transformation Would Require

A decision to replace the NZDF would have legal consequences that are often overlooked in strategic debate. Defence legislation, command authority, military justice, employment conditions, veterans' entitlements, international agreements and emergency powers all assume the existence of armed forces. Reform would therefore require a substantial legislative programme rather than a Cabinet decision followed by administrative transfer.

The first principle should be civilian legality. New security agencies must have clearly defined coercive powers. Police powers, maritime boarding authority, detention, search, firearms use and emergency requisition should be grounded in statute and subject to review. One advantage of shifting functions from military to civilian institutions is that their legal purpose becomes more closely tied to law enforcement rather than the broader law of armed conflict.

Overseas use of force would be more complex. A conventional military can deploy under international mandates and operate according to military rules of engagement. A police-led system would need specific authority for overseas stabilisation, evacuation and protection missions. New Zealand might retain a small Armed Service or Armed Response Group precisely to preserve a lawful vehicle for such operations.

Military justice would largely disappear for personnel transferred into civilian services, but disciplined service law may still be necessary for deployable uniformed units. Government would need to decide whether a common National Security Service Act should create duties, deployment obligations and disciplinary standards different from ordinary public service employment.

Veterans' policy should be protected explicitly. Personnel who served under previous arrangements should retain entitlements and recognition. Service cemeteries, memorials, honours and ceremonial responsibilities should continue. The reform debate should not allow administrative restructuring to become a culture war over military history.

Governance also requires preventing over-centralisation. A National Security Council with broad intelligence, police, cyber and emergency responsibilities would be powerful. Parliamentary scrutiny, inspector-general functions, judicial review and transparent budget reporting would be essential. The goal is stronger coordination, not an unaccountable security state.

Procurement rules would need reform. A technology-led model should avoid recreating defence procurement pathologies in a new agency. Government should buy commercial services where appropriate, use modular systems, conduct frequent competitive replacement and avoid bespoke platforms unless sovereign requirements genuinely demand them. The DCP's two-year review cycle and interest in earlier adoption of proven technologies provides a useful precedent.[9]

Local government must also be integrated. Disaster response, infrastructure and community policing depend on regional institutions. A centralised security system that ignores councils, utilities and iwi would fail during real emergencies. National standards should therefore coexist with local response networks and community legitimacy.

Maori participation deserves explicit consideration. The NZDF has developed strong service identities and relationships with tikanga Maori. A transformed security architecture should preserve and deepen those relationships rather than treating them as military branding. Iwi are important partners in civil defence, community resilience and local security.

Institutional transformation should finally include an independent review mechanism after five and ten years. Reform of this scale will produce unexpected gaps. Government should be willing to restore or redesign capabilities where evidence shows that the new system is insufficient.

FINANCING THE MODEL

Where Savings Would Come From - and Where They Would Go

The financial case for transformation should be conservative. It would be misleading to assume that abolishing conventional forces immediately releases the entire defence budget for hospitals and schools. Many costs remain: personnel, pensions, aircraft, patrol vessels, intelligence, cyber security, emergency engineering, facilities and technology. Some transition costs would rise before savings appear.

The largest potential savings would come from avoiding future generations of high-end combat platforms and the supporting systems required to sustain them. Frigate replacement, land strike, armoured-system replacement, weapons stocks and combat-specific training infrastructure all create long liabilities. If these functions are not retained, government avoids both acquisition and through-life costs.

Personnel savings are more limited because many people would transfer into new agencies. Indeed, a stronger Police and Maritime Security Agency may require more frontline staff than the current NZDF. This is consistent with the user's premise: the reform is intended to strengthen internal and border security, not simply reduce headcount.

A transition fund should therefore capture avoided capital spending and redirect it into three areas. The first is national security transformation itself: surveillance systems, police capability, cyber infrastructure, emergency stockpiles and new maritime vessels. The second is resilience investment in critical infrastructure. The third is broader social capacity, particularly health and education, once the new system has reached stable operating capability.

The sequencing matters. Redirecting savings to general spending before replacement capabilities are operational would create a dangerous security gap. Government should initially ring-fence the majority of savings for security and resilience. Only verified efficiencies should be released to other priorities.

Over the longer term, the social dividend could still be significant. A country that avoids repeated billion-dollar combat-platform replacement cycles gains fiscal room. Even modest permanent savings compound over decades. Education, health and infrastructure investments also generate economic returns that expand future fiscal capacity.

The correct metric is therefore total lifecycle security cost. Government should publish comparative thirty-year cost models for a DCP-style conventional force and the alternative national-security architecture. Those models should include personnel, facilities, training, ammunition, maintenance, upgrades, contractors and transition costs. Without this analysis, claims on either side about savings remain rhetorical.

There is also an economic-development question. Defence procurement can support domestic industry, as the Government has emphasised. A technology-led security model could do the same in different sectors: drones, software, satellite analytics, communications, cyber security, marine robotics and resilient infrastructure. These may have broader civilian export potential than traditional military procurement.

A New Zealand security-industrial policy should therefore focus on dual-use technologies. Commercial maritime sensors, autonomous systems and disaster-response tools can serve both national security and civilian markets. This aligns security investment with economic strategy rather than creating an isolated defence industrial base.

Ultimately, the fiscal case is not about peace dividends alone. It is about converting spending from narrow contingency capability into assets with daily public value. A surveillance network monitors fisheries in peacetime and hostile activity in crisis. Emergency engineering responds to floods and sabotage. Cyber teams protect commerce and government. Police intelligence counters crime and foreign interference. The same dollar can generate more than one security effect.

PACIFIC AND ALLIANCE SCENARIOS

How the Alternative Model Would Operate in Real Crises

A useful test of the proposed system is to apply it to plausible scenarios. The first is a major cyclone striking a Pacific partner. Under the current model, New Zealand may deploy aircraft, ships, engineers and logistics personnel from the NZDF. Under the alternative model, the same functions would be generated by the National Aviation Service, Resilience Corps and Maritime Security Agency. Police or civil-defence specialists would support local authorities, while commercial contractors would provide surge engineering under pre-negotiated frameworks.

The second scenario is political disorder in a Pacific island state accompanied by requests for assistance. The initial deployment would be police-led, supported by intelligence, communications and a small armed security element if the threat level required it. The aim would be to reinforce local law and order rather than establish a military footprint. This follows lessons from RAMSI, where police and governance functions were central to long-term stabilisation.[25]

A third scenario is a foreign research or state-linked vessel conducting suspicious activity near critical undersea infrastructure. The National Surveillance Command would detect anomalous behaviour through satellite, AIS, acoustic or UAV data. A Maritime Security Agency patrol vessel would investigate, supported by aviation and intelligence. If the activity crossed into hostile state action, diplomatic and allied channels would activate. A frigate is not necessary for the detection and initial sovereign response.

A fourth scenario is a large-scale cyber campaign against energy and financial systems. Conventional military capability has little direct utility. The national response would depend on cyber teams, intelligence, private operators, continuity plans and public communications. This is precisely the class of threat for which reallocation creates stronger independent effect.

Scenario five is major-power war in the Indo-Pacific. This is the most difficult case for the alternative model. New Zealand would possess less capacity to contribute kinetic force and would rely more heavily on Australia and other partners for external defence. Its contribution might include intelligence, surveillance, logistics, secure ports and airfields, maritime patrol, cyber defence, search and rescue and support to allied forces using New Zealand territory. The country would remain strategically relevant but not a significant combatant.

Critics will argue that this amounts to relying on others to fight while New Zealand protects the rear. That criticism is partly correct. The policy choice is whether New Zealand should pay the cost of maintaining a small combat contribution that still cannot determine the outcome. Strategic specialisation accepts asymmetry rather than disguising it.

A sixth scenario is a direct armed attack on a New Zealand installation by a small hostile group or state proxy. Police tactical units, the Armed Response Group and surveillance assets would provide the first response. Critical sites would have pre-planned security. The system would retain enough armed capacity for terrorism, sabotage and limited incursions even though it would not field a conventional army.

Scenario seven is a prolonged maritime blockade or coercive disruption. New Zealand's vulnerability would depend on shipping, fuel, ports, communications and allied sea control. A small national frigate fleet would make only a limited

contribution to breaking a blockade imposed by a major navy. Resilient stocks, diversified supply, protected infrastructure and alliance response would be decisive. The alternative model therefore directs investment toward endurance and partner access.

These scenarios show the central trade. The proposed architecture is stronger across the threats New Zealand is most likely to manage independently and weaker in coalition kinetic warfare. The existing DCP moves in the opposite direction by investing more heavily in combat capability while retaining whole-of-government support functions. The national choice depends on which risk profile is judged more credible.

No option removes dependence. The current NZDF depends on allied intelligence, logistics and high-end combat support. The alternative model depends more explicitly on allies for major warfare. Strategic honesty requires recognising dependence in both cases and deciding where New Zealand should invest its scarce independent capacity.

HISTORICAL LESSONS

From Expeditionary Tradition to Security Specialisation

New Zealand's expeditionary tradition has often been described as evidence that international military participation is itself a national interest. There is truth in this. Small states have limited diplomatic weight, and visible contribution can translate into access and influence. Yet the historical record also shows that the political return from military participation has varied substantially. In some cases, contribution strengthened critical relationships; in others, New Zealand accepted political and operational risks for outcomes over which it had little control.

The First World War created the deepest cultural foundation for expeditionary service, but it occurred inside an imperial system in which New Zealand's external security was inseparable from Britain's survival. The Second World War reinforced this logic and, in the Pacific, brought the threat much closer to the region. Neither conflict provides a direct blueprint for the twenty-first century. They demonstrate the importance of alliances and national mobilisation, but not that a permanent small expeditionary military is the only way to preserve those relationships today.

Korea is particularly instructive because the military and diplomatic purposes were closely connected. The deployment was not merely a contribution to an abstract UN principle; it helped Wellington secure a much-desired American commitment to Pacific security. In that context, the military contribution had strategic leverage beyond its battlefield size. A modern equivalent would require the same test: what specific political or security return does New Zealand obtain from each capability it maintains? If the answer is only general goodwill, government should ask whether a different contribution could purchase the same goodwill at lower cost.

Malaya and Confrontation demonstrated the value of disciplined small-unit capability and regional familiarity. They also showed that military effectiveness in irregular conflict depends on intelligence, local political legitimacy, police capacity and administrative control. These campaigns are sometimes remembered principally through the military lens because soldiers were deployed, but the strategic solution was broader. This is precisely the kind of historical distortion the proposed reform seeks to avoid: the institution that carries risk becomes more visible than the institutions that ultimately secure the outcome.

Vietnam offers the clearest caution about alliance logic becoming self-sustaining. The official historical record acknowledges that fear of damaging ANZUS influenced the combat commitment.[8] This does not mean the deployment was irrational; alliances depend on credibility. It does show that a military may be used primarily to maintain a relationship rather than to defeat a direct threat to New Zealand. If that remains a core purpose today, the Government should say so and allow the public to assess the value of the insurance premium.

East Timor was different. The breakdown of order after the 1999 referendum created a genuine regional humanitarian and security emergency, and New Zealand's contribution was substantial relative to its size. Armed forces were necessary initially because the operating environment was reportedly dangerous and local security institutions could not provide protection. Yet the desired end state was a functioning civilian state, not a permanent military settlement. The mission therefore supports a model in which armed capacity exists as an enabling layer around policing and institution building rather than as the default centre of gravity.

Bougainville is even more suggestive of New Zealand's comparative advantage. New Zealand's diplomatic style, willingness to work with local actors and emphasis on confidence-building became important features of the peace process. The lesson is that Wellington's influence often derives from credibility and relationships more than coercive power. A security architecture that strengthens police, mediation, governance and regional expertise may therefore reinforce rather than reduce New Zealand's diplomatic leverage.

RAMSI in Solomon Islands illustrates the institutional mix more directly. The intervention included military security, but it also deployed hundreds of police and a large civilian governance component. The long-term problem was not an enemy army; it was a state whose police, finance, justice and administrative systems had been weakened by conflict and corruption. A future New Zealand force designed principally around law and order, governance support and resilience would be directly relevant to this type of mission.[25]

Afghanistan provides the opposite lesson: tactical competence cannot compensate for strategic dependency. New Zealand personnel performed effectively, and the Bamyan Provincial Reconstruction Team contributed to local stability and development. But New Zealand could not control the national political settlement, coalition strategy, Pakistan's role, Afghan institutional weaknesses or the decision to withdraw. When the Taliban returned to power, the limits of small-state military influence became impossible to ignore.

This pattern should shape future criteria for overseas deployment. New Zealand should ask four questions before maintaining a capability primarily for expeditionary use. Is the mission directly connected to a defined national interest? Can New Zealand's contribution materially affect the desired outcome? Is military force the most appropriate instrument? And is the relationship benefit obtainable through another form of contribution? If the answers are weak, the capability should not receive automatic protection merely because it has historical precedent.

The operational record also reveals the durability of logistics and engineering as national strengths. Almost every significant deployment relies on movement, communications, medical support, planning and sustainment. These skills transfer directly to disaster relief and national resilience. They should therefore be treated as core sovereign capabilities even if the combat structure around them changes.

A final historical lesson concerns adaptability. New Zealand has repeatedly changed its force structure when strategic circumstances demanded it. The country shifted from imperial defence to ANZUS, moved away from compulsory service, ended the combat air force, introduced modern maritime patrol aircraft and increasingly integrates uncrewed systems. The proposition that the three-service model itself is immutable is inconsistent with this history. Institutional adaptation is part of New Zealand's defence tradition, not a rejection of it.

MARITIME TECHNOLOGY

What Persistent Sovereignty Could Look Like in Practice

A technology-led maritime model requires more specificity than the assertion that drones can replace frigates. No single unmanned system can substitute for a crewed ship across every task. The strongest architecture is layered. Satellites provide wide-area detection and repeated observation; long-endurance UAVs provide identification and tracking; autonomous surface craft maintain local persistence; crewed patrol vessels provide legal presence, boarding, rescue and physical intervention. Intelligence analysis connects the layers.

The first layer should be commercial and government satellite data. Synthetic aperture radar can detect vessels through cloud and darkness; optical imagery can assist identification; radio-frequency geolocation can help identify emitters; and commercial vessel data can be fused with Automatic Identification System information. New Zealand does not need to own every satellite. A sovereign analytical capability can be built around purchased data and selective national sensors.

The second layer is long-endurance unmanned aviation. The DCP already identifies long-range uncrewed aerial vehicles for persistent maritime surveillance.[9] These aircraft could patrol sectors too distant or uneconomic for constant P-8A coverage, cue crewed aircraft when a contact is important and support search operations. The challenge is communications, weather, airspace integration and legal certification, not fundamental feasibility.

The third layer is autonomous surface and subsurface surveillance. Small unmanned vessels can remain at sea for long periods, carry radar, electro-optical sensors or acoustic payloads and create a persistent presence around key approaches, undersea cables or protected areas. Subsurface systems could assist in monitoring critical infrastructure or environmental conditions. They are not warships, but their persistence changes the economics of awareness.

The fourth layer remains crewed. Once a vessel must be boarded, detained, rescued or physically escorted, people are required. New Zealand would therefore need capable offshore patrol vessels with good endurance, helicopter or drone facilities and sufficient accommodation for boarding teams. Fast craft would support coastal interception. The fleet might be numerically larger than today's Navy even though individual vessels are less combat-intensive.

The fifth layer is command and data fusion. Maritime surveillance becomes useful only when information is converted into decisions. A National Maritime Operations Centre should integrate Defence-derived intelligence, Customs, fisheries, police, commercial shipping data, weather, satellite feeds and partner information. Artificial intelligence can prioritise anomalies, but human analysts should remain responsible for attribution and enforcement decisions.

This system would also improve ordinary resource management. Fisheries enforcement could be targeted according to risk rather than routine patrol patterns. Environmental agencies could monitor pollution. Search and rescue coordinators would have a richer operating picture. Pacific partners could receive data products tailored to their own EEZs. The same infrastructure therefore supports sovereignty, law enforcement, safety and diplomacy.

A key objection is vulnerability. Satellites can be disrupted, communications jammed and drones lost. A distributed system should therefore be designed for graceful degradation. Multiple commercial providers, terrestrial radar, airborne sensors and partner feeds reduce single points of failure. Crewed vessels remain available when networks are degraded. Resilience comes from redundancy rather than reliance on one exquisite platform.

Another objection is that autonomous systems cannot signal resolve like a warship. This is true. Presence has political value. The solution is not to eliminate crewed vessels but to reserve them for situations where presence matters. A patrol vessel carrying New Zealand officers and able to board or escort a ship still represents sovereign authority. The question is whether it needs anti-air missiles and anti-submarine warfare systems to perform that function.

In a major allied conflict, the surveillance network would have substantial military value even if New Zealand lacked frigates. Maritime tracks, acoustic data, satellite analysis, secure airfields and logistics information can support partner operations. This is exactly the kind of asymmetric contribution that could underpin a new bargain with Australia.

The model also fits procurement realities. Technology cycles for drones, sensors and software are shorter than shipbuilding cycles. A modular architecture allows New Zealand to upgrade capability continuously rather than locking sensors and weapons into a platform expected to serve for thirty or forty years. This is particularly important in an era where autonomy and artificial intelligence are advancing rapidly.

The maritime transformation should therefore be framed not as replacing ships with drones but as replacing a platform-centric concept with a network-centric one. Ships become response nodes inside a persistent surveillance system. This is a better match for a vast EEZ and limited population.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Trade, China and the Meaning of Neutrality

Strategic neutrality is often misunderstood as moral equivalence between major powers or as a refusal to take positions on international law. The approach advanced in the earlier ADG Consult AUKUS paper was different: preserve the freedom to make decisions according to New Zealand's own interests rather than allowing bloc competition to determine policy automatically. Defence reform would operationalise that principle.

The economic relationship with China is central because it creates both prosperity and vulnerability. Two-way trade above NZ\$41 billion demonstrates scale, but the issue is broader than the headline number.[10] Dairy, meat, forestry, education, tourism and associated regional economies all have exposure to Chinese demand. A serious security policy therefore cannot treat economic retaliation as an externality. Market access is part of national resilience.

At the same time, dependence on China creates its own security risk. A policy of non-alignment that rests on fear of economic punishment is not strategic autonomy; it is constraint. New Zealand should therefore pursue diversification precisely so that it can maintain constructive China relations without becoming politically vulnerable to the relationship. Trade diversification and defence reform should be pursued together.

The security relationship with Australia is structurally different. Geography makes Australia New Zealand's indispensable partner. Even a strategically neutral New Zealand cannot be strategically indifferent to Australian security. A hostile power dominating Australia or its approaches would transform New Zealand's environment. The reform model therefore assumes a durable security relationship with Canberra, not equidistance between Australia and China.

The difference lies in operational integration. New Zealand can support Australian security without matching Australian force structure. Persistent South Pacific surveillance, cyber cooperation, intelligence, logistics access, resilient ports and Pacific relationships may be more valuable to Australia than a small New Zealand combat contribution. This should become the basis of bilateral negotiation.

AUKUS Pillar II illustrates the nuance. Some technology areas - cyber defence, artificial intelligence, autonomous surveillance and secure communications - align closely with the proposed national-security model. New Zealand could seek access to such technologies through bilateral or selective arrangements without adopting the wider strategic identity of AUKUS. The distinction should be based on function and political signal rather than a blanket yes or no.

Neutrality would also require diplomatic credibility. New Zealand should be willing to criticise coercion or breaches of international law regardless of the actor. Strategic independence is not silence. The purpose is to avoid turning every disagreement into military alignment and to preserve the ability to maintain economic and political relationships across blocs.

A reduced conventional military may actually make this posture easier because New Zealand would have fewer procurement and operational dependencies tied to allied war planning. Intelligence dependence would remain significant, however, and government should invest in national analytical capacity to prevent strategic assessment becoming entirely imported.

The central imbalance - Western security relationships and Asian economic exposure - cannot be eliminated. It can only be managed. A security architecture focused on resilience gives New Zealand more room to manage it because the country's defence identity is less tightly coupled to coalition warfighting.

WORKFORCE AND CULTURE

What Happens to the People, Skills and Institutions

The human dimension is likely to determine whether reform succeeds. The NZDF is not simply a collection of platforms. It is a professional culture with recruitment systems, leadership development, technical trades, operational standards and a strong sense of service. A policy that treats personnel as interchangeable public servants would destroy capability faster than new agencies could replace it.

The transition should therefore begin with skills mapping. Every military trade should be assessed according to whether its competence remains necessary in the future model. Engineers, logisticians, pilots, aircraft technicians, maritime engineers, communications specialists, intelligence analysts, medics, divers, explosive-ordnance specialists, cyber personnel and special operators would all have clear destinations. Many sailors could move directly into a Maritime Security Agency without changing the practical nature of their work.

Combat arms would require more difficult choices. Some infantry personnel could transfer into a National Security Guard, protective-security units, specialist police or emergency reserve. Artillery and armoured crews would have fewer direct equivalents if those capabilities were retired. Government should provide generous retraining and career-transition programmes rather than rely on attrition alone.

Rank structures could be simplified but should not be abolished immediately. Hierarchy has operational value in emergencies. Maritime, aviation and resilience services need clear command. The key change is that rank would reflect service responsibility rather than military status. Existing personnel could retain equivalent grades during transition.

Recruitment might improve in some areas. A civilian national-security career could attract technical specialists who do not want a conventional military lifestyle. Cyber experts, engineers, pilots and analysts may be easier to recruit if they can combine public service with civilian professional identity. Conversely, the loss of military culture may reduce attraction for those motivated by combat service and tradition.

Reserve reform could become a major advantage. Instead of asking civilians to train primarily for military roles, New Zealand could create a National Resilience Reserve. Members would train in emergency engineering, logistics, communications, medical response, cyber incident support and maritime surge tasks. Employers could receive incentives for participation, and qualifications could be recognised professionally.

Military bases would also need a new purpose. Some could become national resilience hubs storing emergency equipment, fuel, communications and transport assets. Waiouru could remain a major training area for armed security, field logistics and disaster exercises. Air bases would continue to support aviation and allied access. Naval facilities would support the Maritime Security Agency and visiting partner vessels.

Ceremonial and historical functions deserve deliberate preservation. Units with important lineage could continue as ceremonial organisations or reserve associations. ANZAC Day, remembrance, battle honours and veterans' support are part of national heritage. Reform should avoid implying that institutional change diminishes past sacrifice.

Leadership culture must also be preserved where it works. Military organisations are often effective in crisis because authority is clear, training is repetitive and personnel are accustomed to uncertainty. Civilian agencies can become process-heavy. The new system should consciously import mission command, exercising and readiness standards rather than assuming coordination will emerge spontaneously.

A transformation office should therefore include senior NZDF personnel, Police, intelligence agencies, NEMA, unions, veterans and external organisational experts. The process must be designed with the people who understand current capability. Reform imposed entirely from outside risks losing precisely the skills it seeks to preserve.

FAILURE MODES

What Could Go Wrong - and How to Prevent It

The strongest case against radical reform is not that the underlying logic is incoherent. It is that institutional transformations often fail in execution. New agencies can become bureaucratic, procurement can drift, responsibilities can overlap and experienced personnel can leave. A security model that looks elegant on paper may perform poorly under pressure.

The first failure mode is underfunding. Political leaders may support abolition because it appears to release money, then fail to fund the replacement institutions. This would create genuine vulnerability. The legislation establishing the new system should therefore include minimum readiness requirements and multi-year capital plans. Savings should not be counted until replacement capability is operational.

The second failure mode is fragmentation. Police, intelligence, maritime and emergency agencies may compete for authority. A strong national coordinating mechanism with clear lead-agency rules is essential. Joint exercises should test command arrangements before crisis rather than discovering ambiguities during one.

The third failure mode is over-reliance on contractors. Commercial capability is useful but cannot be assumed available during a national emergency. Contracts must include mobilisation obligations, and the state must retain sovereign capability for essential functions. Private firms should supplement a public core, not replace it completely.

The fourth failure mode is technological optimism. Drones and satellites are not magic. Weather, cyber attack, jamming, maintenance and communications failure can reduce their effectiveness. The architecture must be redundant and

retain human operators, patrol vessels and alternative sensors. Technology should reduce manpower requirements without creating brittle dependence.

The fifth failure mode is alliance mismanagement. If Australia interprets reform as withdrawal, political damage could exceed the savings. New Zealand should negotiate capability specialisation before retiring major systems and seek explicit recognition of the contributions the new model will provide.

The sixth failure mode is loss of warfighting knowledge that later proves necessary. Some expertise can be preserved through exchange postings, training agreements and reserve structures even if New Zealand no longer owns the full capability. Officers and specialists could serve temporarily with Australian or partner forces to retain understanding of major operations.

The seventh failure mode is domestic politicisation. A larger national-security police structure could become controversial if powers are poorly defined. Strong oversight, warrants, judicial review and transparent reporting are essential. Reform must strengthen security without weakening civil liberties.

The eighth failure mode is cultural rejection by personnel and the public. If the change is framed as punishment for the military, resistance will be intense and morale will collapse. Government should frame the project around strategic modernisation and preservation of useful capability. Veterans and serving members should be treated as stakeholders rather than obstacles.

The ninth failure mode is strategic surprise during transition. A ten-to-fifteen-year programme overlaps with a potentially unstable period in the Indo-Pacific. Existing combat assets should therefore be retired gradually and only after alternative arrangements are credible. Transition should be reversible at defined decision points.

These risks do not invalidate the proposal. They establish the conditions under which it should proceed. A poorly executed reform would be worse than the current system. The standard should therefore be demanding: no capability is removed merely because the concept is attractive; it is removed only when government can explain how the underlying security effect will be delivered instead.

CASE STUDIES

Operational Case Studies and the Capability They Actually Required

The value of the reform argument becomes clearer when selected operations are examined not by service identity but by capability. Korea required combat artillery, naval escort and coalition integration. It is the strongest case for the traditional military model because New Zealand entered an interstate war and its forces performed genuinely military tasks. Yet even there, the strategic effect came from serving inside a much larger United Nations command. New Zealand could not have generated the theatre intelligence, air power, logistics or command architecture independently. Korea therefore supports the proposition that conventional capability is useful principally when New Zealand chooses to participate in a wider coalition.

Malaya required a different mix. Counter-insurgency depended on patrols, intelligence, local knowledge, population security and political control. Military forces mattered, but they functioned inside a wider state campaign. If New Zealand faced an analogous regional requirement today, highly trained security personnel, intelligence specialists and police advisers could contribute substantially even without a broad conventional force. The historical tendency to label the entire experience as 'military' can hide the extent to which success depended on civilian institutions.

The Indonesian Confrontation similarly involved limited operations, border security and deterrence rather than mass warfare. New Zealand's participation demonstrated alliance solidarity and specialist military competence. It did not require an independent national war effort. A future security model could still retain specialised armed units capable of operating with partners in limited contingencies if government judged the political return worthwhile.

Vietnam is instructive because the military commitment diversified over time. New Zealand sent artillery, infantry and SAS personnel, but also medical teams and air support. The humanitarian and advisory elements were not peripheral; they reflected the broader challenge of state legitimacy and civilian welfare. A future New Zealand contribution to a comparable crisis could therefore be larger in police, medical, engineering or governance terms while being smaller in combat terms.

East Timor demonstrates how rapidly the balance can change from military to civilian security. The initial environment required armed forces capable of restoring order and protecting civilians. Once violence reduced, the strategic requirement shifted toward policing, administration and institution building. A national-security model should be able to surge armed protection for the first phase while transitioning quickly to civilian capability. This is more flexible than treating the military as the default institution throughout the mission.

Solomon Islands is even closer to New Zealand's likely future regional role. RAMSI deployed military forces because the initial security environment was uncertain, yet policing and governance became the core. By September 2003 the mission included 280 police officers and 1,840 military personnel from participating states, alongside finance and justice advisers.[25] The balance itself shows that regional security interventions are multi-institutional. The lesson for New Zealand is to invest in the components most likely to persist after the initial crisis.

Afghanistan tested both combat and provincial reconstruction. New Zealand's SAS operated at the high end of military risk, while the Bamyan Provincial Reconstruction Team combined security and development functions. The eventual collapse of the internationally supported Afghan government demonstrates that tactical excellence cannot substitute for sustainable political institutions. It is a warning against assuming that the ability to deploy soldiers creates strategic leverage over complex societies.

The Christchurch earthquake provides the opposite kind of lesson. The NZDF was useful because it had disciplined manpower, vehicles, communications and logistics available immediately. None of those capabilities depended on an external enemy. The key attribute was readiness. A civilian replacement must therefore be designed around response times and exercised mobilisation rather than around peacetime staffing alone.

Kaikoura in 2016 adds the importance of joint access. Roads and rail were severed, making air and sea support critical. RNZAF reconnaissance rapidly collected imagery, NH90 helicopters evacuated people and naval vessels supported the relief effort; international ships already in New Zealand were also retasked.[21] The strategic requirement was mobility across broken infrastructure. This argues strongly for preserving aviation, sealift and logistics even if combat capability is reduced.

Cyclone Gabrielle showed the same principle on a larger national scale. NZDF personnel supported coordination centres, rescues, evacuations, supply movement and restoration of services.[14] Those tasks map almost directly onto the proposed National Resilience and Emergency Corps. The key question is whether they are more reliably generated by a military that also trains for combat or by an organisation whose primary mission is national resilience. The answer depends on whether the latter is funded and exercised with equivalent discipline.

These case studies show that 'the NZDF was useful' is not a sufficient analytical conclusion. The next question must always be 'which capabilities were useful, and why?' Once that question is asked, a substantial part of the force structure can be separated from conventional warfighting. Surveillance, transport, engineering, logistics, communications, specialist armed response and command remain valuable. The requirement for broad land and naval combat capability is much less frequently demonstrated.

The implication is not that historical combat experience should be discounted. It should be used selectively. Korea demonstrates that New Zealand can choose to fight alongside partners. Vietnam demonstrates that alliance politics can shape such choices. East Timor and RAMSI demonstrate that civilian security institutions determine long-term outcomes. Domestic disasters demonstrate that readiness and logistics are core sovereign needs. A future model should preserve what these experiences actually teach rather than preserving every institution associated with them.

RISK COMPARISON

What New Zealand Gains and Loses Under Each Model

A decision of this scale should ultimately be understood as a transfer of risk. The current DCP model accepts high financial cost and alliance integration in order to preserve a wider set of military options. The proposed national-security model accepts greater dependence on partners in major war in order to strengthen independent capability against more probable non-conventional threats. Neither option eliminates vulnerability.

Under the current model, New Zealand gains the ability to deploy a combat-capable frigate, field a small combined-arms land force, maintain military special operations and integrate more deeply with Australian and other partner formations. It preserves institutional knowledge of warfare and gives government more options if it chooses to join coalition combat. These are real strategic benefits.

The current model also carries structural weaknesses. The force is small enough that readiness and availability remain sensitive to personnel shortages and maintenance. High-end platforms consume large shares of capital expenditure. Capability gaps remain because New Zealand cannot fund every enabler. The state may therefore pay heavily to preserve options that still depend on allied command, logistics, intelligence and firepower.

Under the alternative model, New Zealand gains more persistent maritime awareness, stronger police and border capability, deeper cyber resilience, greater emergency-response capacity and a security system that operates continuously against everyday threats. It can concentrate technical talent in intelligence and surveillance rather than spreading scarce personnel across conventional military functions.

The alternative model loses independent naval combat capability and much of the institutional capacity for land warfare. New Zealand would be less able to contribute kinetic force at the opening of a major regional conflict. It would have less leverage in military planning forums and might face criticism from Australia and other partners. Reconstitution would be slow if the strategic environment deteriorated sharply.

The invasion risk therefore becomes the decisive philosophical divide. Supporters of the DCP argue that the consequences of being unprepared for major war are so severe that even a low-probability threat justifies maintaining conventional capability. Supporters of reform argue that the capability New Zealand can realistically afford is too small to solve the major-war problem independently, making resilience and alliances more rational forms of insurance.

A similar divide exists over deterrence. The current model seeks deterrence through combat capability and alliance integration. The alternative seeks deterrence through denial of political effect: strong intelligence, resilient infrastructure, rapid attribution, protected borders, persistent surveillance and credible partner relationships. The first threatens military cost; the second reduces the benefits an adversary could gain through coercion.

The maritime comparison is especially clear. A frigate can fight and can signal resolve, but it cannot continuously observe the EEZ. A surveillance network can observe persistently but cannot survive or dominate a high-intensity naval engagement. New Zealand cannot maximise both objectives cheaply. Strategy is the act of choosing which matters more.

The fiscal risk also differs. The DCP commits the country to a long-term expenditure floor and recurring platform replacement. The alternative creates substantial transition costs and may require higher police and infrastructure spending, but it avoids some major combat recapitalisation cycles. Government should model both over thirty years rather than comparing only annual budgets.

Diplomatic risk is similarly two-sided. Greater military integration may strengthen ties with Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom but complicate relations with China and some Pacific audiences. A more neutral security posture may preserve diplomatic flexibility but generate doubts among allies about burden sharing. The correct answer depends partly on how much political value Wellington assigns to alliance identity compared with autonomy.

Workforce risk favours continuity in the short term. The NZDF already exists, trains and operates. Building new agencies creates uncertainty. Over the long term, however, a civilian security model may attract a broader technical workforce and align careers more closely with the tasks New Zealand actually performs. Transition design determines which effect dominates.

The most responsible policy process would therefore score each model against a published set of criteria: direct defence of New Zealand, maritime sovereignty, Pacific support, alliance value, cyber resilience, disaster response, fiscal sustainability, workforce viability, diplomatic flexibility and reconstitution risk. The present paper would weight maritime sovereignty, resilience and fiscal sustainability more heavily than coalition combat contribution. The current DCP implicitly applies different weights. Making those weights explicit would improve democratic debate.

There is no risk-free answer. The argument for transformation rests on the assessment that New Zealand's present force structure offers too little independent military effect to justify the scale of future investment required, while non-conventional and resilience threats offer more opportunities for national action. If that assessment is wrong, reform could leave New Zealand dangerously dependent. If the DCP assessment is wrong, New Zealand could spend tens of billions preserving capabilities that remain strategically marginal.

That is why the next decision should not be a procurement decision alone. It should be a national strategy decision. Once New Zealand commits to a new generation of frigates, strike systems and integrated warfighting capability, the institutional path becomes difficult to reverse. The country should resolve the strategic question before it resolves the platform question.

IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

A Practical Fifteen-Year Transition Sequence

If the national-security transformation were adopted, implementation should be governed by explicit milestones rather than by a general aspiration to 'civilianise' defence. Years one and two should be devoted to the National Security Design Review, legal mapping, workforce analysis and the establishment of a joint transition office. During this period, the Government should avoid irreversible commitments to replacement combat platforms unless they are demonstrably required irrespective of the review outcome.

By the end of year two, Cabinet should publish the target operating model. This should identify which capabilities are retained, transferred or retired; define the relationship with Australia; specify the legal status of the proposed Maritime Security Agency, National Surveillance Command and Resilience Corps; and provide a thirty-year comparative cost model. The document should be sufficiently detailed that Parliament and the public can see what replaces each major NZDF function.

Years three to five would be the institutional build phase. Maritime surveillance and border coordination should move first because the operational requirement is immediate and the technology already exists. A joint Maritime Operations Centre could be established before the RNZN is formally reorganised, allowing government to test integrated tasking across Defence, Customs, fisheries, Police and Maritime New Zealand. Long-endurance unmanned surveillance should be introduced during this period, alongside commercial satellite contracts and data-fusion capability.

Police expansion would occur in parallel. Specialist recruitment should prioritise cyber investigators, intelligence analysts, financial-crime specialists, tactical personnel and protective-security officers. Training capacity would need to expand before headcount grows substantially; otherwise the reform would simply dilute quality. Existing military specialists should be offered lateral-entry pathways where skills are transferable.

The Resilience Corps should reach initial operating capability by approximately year five. At that point New Zealand should be able to deploy engineering, logistics, communications and emergency-management teams domestically without relying on combat formations. Commercial framework agreements should have been exercised at national scale at least once, and strategic stocks of communications, water, fuel-handling and temporary infrastructure equipment should be in place.

Years five to eight would be the principal force-structure transition. Conventional capabilities nearing end of life would either be retired or transferred. Decisions on frigate replacement would be especially important. If the national-security model has demonstrated that maritime awareness and response can be delivered without high-end combat vessels, New Zealand should not enter a new thirty-year frigate cycle. If evidence shows that alliance and sea-control requirements remain compelling, a smaller residual naval combat element could be retained without abandoning the wider reform.

This flexibility matters because transformation should be evidence-driven rather than doctrinaire. The hypothesis of this paper is that New Zealand no longer requires a traditional military force; it is still a hypothesis that must survive operational testing. A staged model allows government to preserve options until replacement capabilities prove themselves.

Years eight to twelve would consolidate the new security system. The Army's conventional combat structure would progressively contract as engineering, logistics, protected mobility and specialist armed capabilities move into their new organisations. Aviation functions would transition into the National Aviation and Surveillance Service or an equivalent structure. Military headquarters functions no longer required would be removed, while joint national-security planning capacity would expand.

By year ten, New Zealand should conduct an independent strategic audit. The audit should compare the new system with the baseline established before reform. It should measure maritime coverage, border interceptions, cyber resilience, disaster response times, Pacific deployment capacity, workforce retention, alliance confidence and total cost. If significant gaps are identified, government should correct them before the final phase.

Years twelve to fifteen would complete the institutional transition. Remaining conventional warfighting capabilities would either be retained deliberately as niche national assets or retired. At that point the legal status of the NZDF itself could be reconsidered. It may be preferable to retain a small New Zealand Armed Service containing special operations, explosive ordnance and limited armed overseas capability rather than abolish the legal concept of armed forces entirely. The policy objective is functional reform, not semantic purity.

Throughout the process, government communication would matter. The reform should not be sold as a peace dividend or an attack on military culture. It should be presented as a national-security modernisation programme. The message to serving personnel should be that useful skills are being preserved and redirected. The message to allies should be that New Zealand is changing the form of its contribution, not abandoning shared security. The message to the public should be that every major capability is being tested against a clear national-security requirement.

A final safeguard should be a statutory requirement for periodic review. The strategic environment may change. Technology may evolve more slowly than expected. Australia may alter its defence posture. Pacific instability may increase. New Zealand should therefore review the model every four years, with a deeper independent review every decade. Strategic reform should create adaptability, not a new orthodoxy.

If these conditions are met, the transition can be managed without creating a sudden security vacuum. The key is sequencing: build surveillance before retiring surveillance platforms; build resilience before removing Army support capacity; negotiate alliance specialisation before reducing combat contribution; and train police and maritime personnel before transferring responsibilities. The reform succeeds only if capability precedes abolition.

NEAR-TERM DECISIONS

The Decisions That Cannot Easily Be Reversed

The next five years contain several decisions that will determine whether New Zealand still has a meaningful choice. The most important is maritime fleet renewal. Once government signs a contract for a new frigate class, it also commits to crews, weapons, infrastructure, maintenance and doctrine for decades. That decision would make a later shift away from conventional naval warfare considerably more expensive. The strategic review proposed in this paper should therefore precede, not follow, commitment to a replacement combat fleet.

A second decision point is future land strike. Replacing the 105 mm Light Gun with a more capable system may improve coalition utility, but it would also deepen investment in conventional land warfare. Government should require a specific statement of the national scenario for which that capability is being purchased and compare it with the cost of alternative resilience and surveillance investments. The question should be what effect New Zealand needs, not what system logically follows from the current Army structure.

A third decision point concerns uncrewed systems. These technologies can either reinforce the existing NZDF or become the foundation of a different security model. If they are purchased only as supplements to frigates, aircraft and

conventional formations, New Zealand may end up paying for both old and new structures simultaneously. The greater opportunity is to use autonomy to substitute for manpower-intensive presence wherever law and safety permit.

A fourth decision point is the Australia relationship. The bilateral defence relationship is moving toward greater integration. New Zealand should decide now whether that integration is intended to culminate in a shared combat force structure or in complementary national specialisation. Both are defensible. Allowing interoperability to deepen without a conscious decision risks making future policy increasingly difficult to reverse.

A fifth decision point is fiscal. The commitment to move above 2 percent of GDP will normalise a much larger defence baseline. If government accepts that baseline before defining the national-security model, future budgets will tend to preserve the institutions that receive the money. A first-principles review should therefore occur while the spending trajectory is still being translated into individual projects.

These decisions make the present debate unusually consequential. New Zealand is not merely deciding whether to repair an underfunded defence force. It is deciding whether to renew the twentieth-century institutional model for another generation. The most prudent course is to resolve that strategic question before capital commitments make the answer automatic.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

Beyond the Defence Force

The defence debate now facing New Zealand is larger than a procurement decision. Choosing a frigate class, replacing artillery or increasing defence expenditure will commit the country to assumptions about security that may endure for decades. This is precisely the point at which those assumptions should be challenged.

New Zealand does not need to demonstrate seriousness by reproducing the institutions of larger powers on a smaller scale. It needs a security system that is credible in the circumstances it actually occupies. Geography gives it warning distance. Partnerships provide strategic depth. Technology can provide persistent awareness. Strong police, intelligence and border institutions can counter the threats most likely to penetrate that geographic buffer. Resilience can reduce the effect of coercion and disaster.

A traditional military gives New Zealand options, particularly the option to fight alongside allies. That option has political value and cannot be dismissed. But it is not synonymous with defence of New Zealand. The country should decide whether preserving expeditionary warfighting is worth the financial, institutional and diplomatic opportunity cost.

The historical argument is powerful but insufficient. New Zealand's military past is part of the national story; it is not a command to preserve every inherited structure. The decision to end the air combat force already demonstrated that capability can be relinquished when national priorities change. The same discipline should now be applied across the defence establishment.

The most credible alternative is not pacifism. It is strategic specialisation: a state that knows what is happening in its maritime domain, can police its borders, resist cyber and political interference, mobilise rapidly after disaster, support Pacific partners and contribute intelligence and technical capability to allies. Such a state may possess fewer traditional symbols of military power while being more secure in practice.

The hardest part is political. Frigates, uniforms and battalions are visible. Resilience is less visible until it fails. Governments therefore receive clearer political signals from buying platforms than from building redundancy, training police investigators or paying for satellite data. A serious national-security strategy must overcome that bias and judge investment by effect rather than symbolism.

New Zealand should therefore pause before committing to another generation of conventional military structure and conduct a genuinely first-principles National Security Design Review. The burden of proof should rest equally on preservation and reform. Each capability should have to demonstrate what national problem it solves, how often that problem is likely to arise, what independent effect New Zealand can generate and whether another institution can deliver the outcome more efficiently.

The central proposition is simple: New Zealand does not need less security. It needs a security architecture designed for New Zealand rather than inherited from the strategic world of its past.

BOTTOM LINE

New Zealand should test whether the next generation of defence spending should reproduce a conventional military force or finance a broader national security system. The preferred direction in this paper is a managed transition toward policing, maritime sovereignty, surveillance, cyber resilience and emergency capability, while preserving strong intelligence and security relationships with Australia and other partners.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Purpose and Scope

This Insight Paper presents a deliberately challenging policy hypothesis. It does not question the professionalism, courage or historical contribution of New Zealand service personnel. It examines whether the institutions developed around that service remain the most effective structure for the country's future security.

The paper distinguishes between factual description and policy assessment. Capability figures, government plans and historical deployment details are drawn from official sources where possible. Recommendations concerning institutional restructuring, transition periods and alternative agencies are proposals for debate rather than descriptions of current New Zealand Government policy.

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- [17] Constitution and Government of Costa Rica sources concerning abolition of the standing army after 1948 and the organisation of public security.
- [18] Government of Panama / National Aeronaval Service materials concerning Panama's police, border and aeronaval security model.
- [19] Government of Mauritius / Mauritius Police Force materials concerning the Special Mobile Force and National Coast Guard.
- [20] New Zealand Defence Force equipment and personnel pages, current 2025-26, used to cross-check force structure, armoured vehicles and artillery references. <https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/>