

# 9. New Zealand's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

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- New Zealand is 'a Pacific Island nation, surrounded by water' with vast maritime security interests.<sup>269</sup>
- New Zealand's stance on nuclear issues has traditionally influenced the nature of its engagement with partners in maritime security.
- New Zealand strongly advocates for Pacific-centred regionalism; however, the deteriorating geostrategic environment appears to be shifting New Zealand's focus from the Pacific's climate emergency to the revival of old alliances in the Anglosphere.

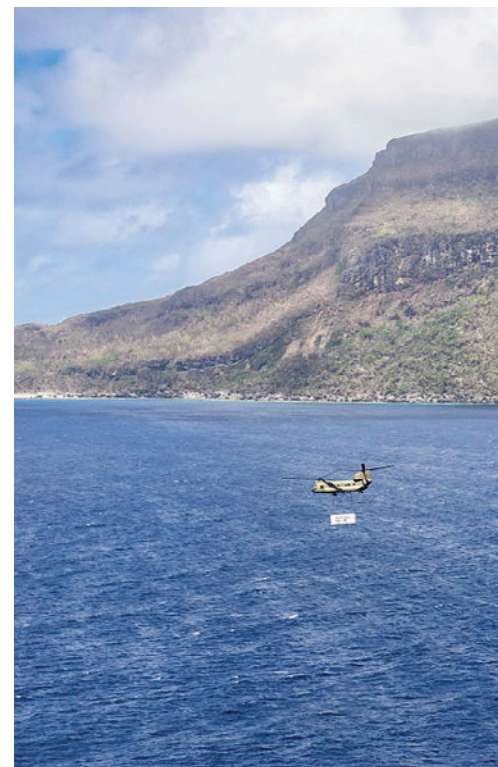
New Zealand's commitment to regional maritime security in the Blue Pacific Continent is directly articulated in its strategic defence policies. A vast (30,000,000km<sup>2</sup>) maritime search and rescue region is surveilled by New Zealand's air and naval forces, stretching from the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Tokelau, Cook Islands, and Niue in the north, all the way to the Ross Dependencies in Antarctica—and interestingly also incorporates the independent EEZs of Samoa and Tonga. This extensive coverage enhances regional maritime domain awareness and underscores New Zealand's commitment to monitoring the vast EEZs of the states and territories with which it maintains constitutional relationships.<sup>270</sup> Within this region, New Zealand responds to approximately 1,500 search and rescue incidents annually.<sup>271</sup>

Geostrategic competition within the Pacific is shrinking the space for New Zealand's soft-balancing tactics in the region and forcing New Zealand to rethink which maritime security alliances will meet its goals for long-term regional security.<sup>272</sup> New Zealand, as a small power, benefits from and supports a stable, rules-based international order which it says is becoming contested due to relative power shifts, economic power being reassessed in a militaristic lens, and a need for greater resilience and prominence of social and sustainability issues.<sup>273</sup>

New Zealand's defence policy has traditionally been shaped by the strategic perception of its distant location in a relatively stable and secure regional environment. Since 2021, New Zealand has re-evaluated this threat perception to acknowledge and address a deteriorating regional strategic environment.<sup>274</sup> The New Zealand Defence Force recognises that 'Pacific stability, security and resilience are connected to, and directly impact, our own security' aiming to 'deliberately to shape our security environment, focusing in particular on supporting security in and for the Pacific'.<sup>275</sup> Given New Zealand's limited assets and resources, one key strategy is to engage with a strong security partner network and enhance their interoperability to realise collective regional security.<sup>276</sup>

## Collaboration with non-Pacific partners over the maritime domain

Within this geopolitical context, historical alliances within the Anglosphere, once strained by New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance, are now being significantly revived and revised.<sup>277</sup> New Zealand uses the Indo-Pacific lexicon, is a



member of the **Five Eyes network**, and is increasingly considering joining the (non-nuclear) **Pillar II of AUKUS**.<sup>278</sup> New Zealand's recent joint statement with the US pronounced 'as the security environment in the Indo-Pacific evolves, so must our defense cooperation'.<sup>279</sup> As further evidence of this shift, Australia recently alluded to its long history of the **Australia-New Zealand-United States Treaty** (ANZUS) despite New Zealand's fraught history and downgrading within this alliance by the US when New Zealand held its ground on its anti-nuclear position.<sup>280</sup> If New Zealand were to join AUKUS, it would constitute a 'seismic' foreign policy shift that aligns with a broader shadow objective of defending the geostrategic interests of historical alliances with the English-speaking colonial powers of the US, UK and Australia.<sup>281</sup> As a prominent advocate of a nuclear-free Pacific, any deviation from New Zealand's strong stance would have significant implications for regional maritime security.<sup>282</sup> There have already been questions raised from within the Pacific about New Zealand's dual membership of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the western-orientated Partners to the Blue Pacific—can New Zealand be both a member of the region and a partner?<sup>283</sup>

## Anti-nuclear stance

New Zealand has always taken a strong anti-nuclear stance, and the issue has 'dominated' its global efforts at the United Nations.<sup>284</sup> In the 1970s the Prime Minister sent defence assets carrying a cabinet minister to Muruora (French Polynesia) to protest against French nuclear testing in the region; responded to what is largely considered a French-sponsored terrorist incident in 1986 where French spies bombed a Greenpeace boat in Auckland Harbour over anti-nuclear protests; and (alongside Australia) took France to the International Criminal Court successfully over its atmospheric testing. It was a proponent of the **South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty** 1985 (Treaty of Rarotonga), which is a central feature of Pacific regionalism.

From 1984, New Zealand declared its country a nuclear-free zone and banned nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed ships from using New Zealand ports or entering New Zealand waters with serious implication for its involvement in the ANZUS Treaty. The **New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act** 1987 prohibits the entry of nuclear-powered or armed vessels in its territorial waters. New Zealand's participation in the New

Zealand-US aspect of ANZUS was suspended in 1986 as New Zealand refused US military vessels entry as they would not declare whether the vessels carried nuclear weapons or not. It was 2016 when a US navy vessel was next allowed to dock in New Zealand.<sup>285</sup>

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More recently, New Zealand has been a strong supporter of the **United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons** 2017. Since 2019, New Zealand has been an active part of the Pacific Islands Forum's Task Force on Nuclear Legacy Issues which examines outstanding environmental and health issues from nuclear testing.<sup>286</sup>

## New Zealand's involvement in regional maritime security governance

As a founding member of the PIF,<sup>287</sup> New Zealand has from the outset played a pivotal role in shaping collective maritime security policy. It actively calls for the Pacific to assert its 'Pacific Centrality' within the geopolitical environment, and argues that 'we should continue to work together as Pacific countries to strengthen our own regional architecture'.<sup>288</sup> New Zealand is a member of all **Council of the Regional Organisations of the Pacific** (CROP)—many with a mandate for ocean governance—governed by the PIF and collectively work towards the **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent**. New Zealand is also an active member of the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces Meeting**, and all regional law enforcement bodies which have maritime governance roles, including the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, Pacific Immigration Development Community,**





Oceania Customs Organisation, and the **Joint Heads of Pacific Security**.

New Zealand's alignment with the 2018 PIF **Boe Declaration on Regional Security**, is directly articulated in its 2023 **Defence Policy and Strategy Statement**, demonstrating its public commitment to collective security efforts. The *Boe Declaration* emphasizes regional security cooperation and acknowledges climate change as the single greatest threat to regional security, a stance New Zealand strongly supports. In the 2018 defence document 'Climate Crisis: Defence Readiness and Responsibilities,' New Zealand highlighted the impact of climate change on national and regional security, including marine natural disasters that threaten regional resilience and strain resources and infrastructure. However, there are contradictions within New Zealand's alignment with Pacific priorities. Most fundamentally, New Zealand remains a high emitting and low performing state in global rankings on climate change performance.<sup>289</sup>

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New Zealand actively promotes the Blue Pacific Continent concept, with Foreign Minister Winston Peters stating that 'the most important thing of course being the peaceful future of the Blue Continent'.<sup>290</sup> This concept is PIF-led under the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, and (among other regional issues) emphasises the importance of safeguarding maritime boundaries against the impacts of climate-induced sea-level rise and promoting peace and stewardship for marine environmental security.<sup>291</sup>

### Fisheries assistance

New Zealand supports the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) both financially,<sup>292</sup> and through regular

joint Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fisheries compliance operations. In addition to bilateral support, New Zealand is a member of the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (Pacific Quad), alongside Australia, France, and the US, which targets maritime crime, inclusive of IUU fishing, working closely with the FFA.<sup>293</sup> This grouping undertakes joint operations using maritime and aerial assets to patrol large EEZs, board suspicious vessels, and issue breaches on non-compliant activities.<sup>294</sup> New Zealand has recently upgraded its maritime domain awareness tools to be able to see IUU fishing and potentially malicious activity in its own EEZ and in the Pacific region.<sup>295</sup>

New Zealand also financially supports the PIF **Office on the Pacific Ocean Commissioner** and the Pacific Community's **Centre for Ocean Science**. New Zealand provides bilateral capacity-building support for Pacific Island countries regarding port inspections, and monitoring EEZs.<sup>296</sup>

Through its maritime domain awareness work and bilateral capacity-building with law enforcement agencies, New Zealand also undertakes efforts to combat maritime-related crimes, including illicit drugs trafficking often undertaken on small crafts which traverse the Pacific. While New Zealand has recently passed legislation to improve its response to potential maritime mass arrivals,<sup>297</sup> it is important to note that New Zealand has never received a maritime mass arrival and there has only ever been one maritime mass arrival in the Pacific Islands region—in the Federated States of Micronesia in 2014.<sup>298</sup> While climate change is undoubtedly likely to change migration patterns, scholars do not predict mass arrivals to New Zealand from the Pacific occurring, with migration occurring at the family level via airplanes.<sup>299</sup>

### Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

Since 1992, New Zealand has cooperated with Australia and France under the *Joint Statement on Disaster Relief Cooperation in the South Pacific*. Under this trilateral **FRANZ Arrangement**, when requested these states coordinate disaster relief efforts in the Pacific region. This arrangement emphasizes Pacific-led cooperation between civilian and military entities with a stated respect for

the sovereignty of affected nations.<sup>300</sup> Originally designed to ensure effective humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) during natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Climate change is changing the severity and frequency of natural disasters for HADR, affecting the ability to respond.<sup>301</sup> FRANZ partners have a strong history of disaster response collaboration. However, with new states entering this space, maintaining trust and reputation is crucial to a continuing invitation to secure the role of first responders.<sup>302</sup>

One of New Zealand's unique contributions to HADR efforts was its specialist dive and hydrographic vessel, HMNZS Manawanui. The naval vessel undertook hydrographical surveys of the sea floor following disasters, charted changes in reefs following tsunamis and cyclones, and identified and disposed of undersea bombs left over from WWII.<sup>303</sup> However, in October 2024, the HMNZS Manawanui collided with a reef in Samoa, and sunk with no lives lost. This caused concerns about the salvage operation and the environmental impact of oil leaks on reefs which are used for food security and tourism. The event occurred just before the Palolo (*Palola viridis* - marine worm, a delicacy only able to be collected on certain nights of the year) season, and the inability to collect the Palolo has a significant economic impact for the villages in that area;<sup>304</sup> several have claimed compensation from the New Zealand government, although New Zealand has not yet responded.<sup>305</sup> Given that New Zealand only had nine naval assets (supported by aerial assets), the loss of the HMNZS Manawanui also affects New Zealand's unique contribution to future HADR responses.

### Maritime safety

New Zealand's **Pacific Maritime Safety Programme** was established in response to several passenger ferry sinkings in Kiribati and Tonga in 2009, the grounding of a cargo ship in Samoa in 2009, and more recently the grounding of two fisheries patrol boats in Samoa and Fiji. The programme assists regulatory capacity in Pacific Island countries; provides search and rescue boats; and supports domestic vessel safety compliance and fleet improvements for seaworthiness.<sup>306</sup>