PART 1:
NZ’s Strategic Risks

2025 picture of China's aircraft carrier and support vessels

It can be argued that the most crucial questions for New Zealand in 2025 are whether China is a risk to New Zealand, what New Zealand can do to counter that risk, whether current government policies adequately address what form the risk from China will take, what New Zealand’s actual defence needs are, what allies it will need, and other related questions.

Earlier this year, 2025, 83% of responders to a survey agreed with the proposition that China was New Zealand's most important Asian partner for the country's future. In March of this year, a further poll showed that 40% of New Zealanders regarded China as a threat.

These survey findings do not present a clear picture. Perhaps they tell us New Zealanders are still in two minds about China, with some believing that it will be possible to both defend against a potential threat from China and at the same time retain confidence that China will remain a major trading partner of New Zealand.

New Zealand is currently spending between 1 and 2% of its gross domestic product on defence. Recent surveys of New Zealand public opinion reveal that approximately 50% consider that New Zealand should be spending more on defence. At the same time, a consensus is emerging in Europe that members of the EU should be spending at least 3% of their GDP on defence. The immediate problem that the EU countries have is with Russia rather than China. In Europe it would seem that the further east that you go and therefore the closer to the Ukraine–Russia war, support for higher levels of defence (that is, over 3% of GDP) strengthens. The European experience may have lessons for far-away New Zealand. One of those may be that the more geographically distant people are from the source of security risk, the more unjustifiably complacent they feel about it.

It is suggested that the time has arrived for New Zealanders to give serious thought to these questions because New Zealand is facing a national security risk, and if a satisfactory and effective defence is to be built, New Zealand needs to get on with it. An important question which is considered in this and following papers is: “Get on with what?”

Several public figures have contributed to greater clarity about there being a threat. The previous Minister of Defence, Andrew Little, raised consciousness on the issue, naming China as a specific concern. So too have the current Defence Minister, Judith Collins, and Foreign Minister Winston Peters.

But we need to go further and develop some precision about what the threat is that New Zealand is responding to and what form it will take. New Zealanders must also have some idea of whether what the government proposes to do will be sufficient or adequate to meet that threat.

It seems likely that the government has an overall plan for defence, otherwise they would not be intending to funnel $12 billion into defence over the next four years. But a willingness to spend money is not on its own enough.

Government defence policy documents provide little guidance on the sort of conflict New Zealand needs to prepare for.

Taking the key question of what the risk is that China poses for New Zealand, the statement in the government’s 2025 Defence Capability Plan (DCP), identifying the problem as “China’s assertive pursuit of its strategic objectives” being the principal driver for strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, is not informative. Nor is a statement that China uses all its tools of statecraft to challenge both international norms and the security of other states. And what were readers to make of the statement that, “Of particular concern is the rapid and non-transparent growth of China’s military capability”?

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The following phraseology used in the earlier 2023 Defence Policy and Strategy Statement is representative of the tone adopted in government defence statements:

"The [New Zealand Defence Force] will pursue these interests by acting early and deliberately to achieve three policy objectives:
• Promoting and protecting New Zealand’s defence interests in our region, particularly in the Pacific.
• Contributing globally to collective security efforts that promote and protect New Zealand’s interests and values.
• Responding to events in New Zealand, in our region, and globally where required".

In terms of vagueness, a 2023 Defence statement that New Zealand's two naval ships are working for "global security" takes some beating. Another statement about "working with our allies in regional and global security” provides nil clarity for the average reader about what New Zealand is actually doing.

The Defence Capability Plan mentioned above seems intended to transition from purely strategic high-level statements of the government's intent into the area of practical steps that it intends to take. That the government is prepared to take timely and decisive action on defence

is to be welcomed, but not if what it is going to do is misplaced. We do not know if it is, because we do not know what the government is talking about.

For all we know, the totality of the government statements about the strategic risk may be proposing to take action which has nothing to do with countering that risk. We just cannot judge in this case because of the lack of a link between talking about the strategic risks and the actions that the government in the Defence Capability Statement 2025 states it is going to take. There is no explanation bridging the two points – no explanation of how the proposed actions will manage the threat from China.

Even the DCS2025, which should be summarising the practical responses that the government intends, devolves into generalized vague statements, leaving us with more questions. For example, in regard to the Navy, we are told that the government will invest over the next 15 years in a “focused and combat-capable Navy with a mixture of combat patrol and multi-role ships.” We are told that the government will invest in a “force sustainment program,” “enhanced strike capabilities,” “a network-enabled arm,” etc. Thereafter, the DCP jumps straight to listing a series of action proposals concerned primarily with what equipment needs to be procured and what defence structures should be adopted to meet the threat. This approach leaves the reader in the dark about what type of battle New Zealand is preparing for and how those proposals are the best way of preparing for it.

New Zealanders search in vain for explanatory statements of a similar nature to this one from the Australian government: “Australia has signed a cooperative agreement with the U.S. for access to Precision Strike Missiles (PrSM), which can be launched from HiMARS vehicles. This partnership is aimed at expanding and accelerating Australia’s long-range land-based strike capabilities, directly contributing to deterrence and the ability to meet strategic threats.”

Australians have also been told that their government is acquiring Tomahawk missiles, which have a range of approximately 1500 kilometres. Government communications and information available on the internet show that Australia is equipping its forces to be able to attack any force invading from the north. Communication about Australia’s military strategy is a paragon of clarity in comparison to what has been provided to date regarding New Zealand’s defence.

The New Zealand government’s vague statements also contrast with the candour from the US regarding its assessment of the risks from China in the Indo-Pacific and the expected US response. They expect China to attempt to blockade or invade Taiwan. Admiral Samuel Paparo, (Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command), says that in such a scenario, the US plans to turn the Taiwan Strait into an "unmanned hellscape" by using thousands of unmanned systems to disrupt or delay an invasion and buy time for a larger allied response.

The issue is not whether you agree with the Admiral's statement of intention. Reference is made to it to demonstrate the directness and clarity that is possible in public communications on questions of defence.

In another example, the US Marine Corps makes no secret that they would be involved in a battle in the SCS, from their deployment positions in the Philippines and elsewhere, probably including the Japanese Nansei islands . Open sources indicate they would likely also employ NMESIS, a ground-based anti-ship missile system.

It is perhaps understandable how New Zealand's defence statements came to be so cloudy and ambiguous on the question of how New Zealand might find itself in conflict with China. Defence officials were likely to be reticent about speaking too specifically about the Chinese threat because of concerns on the part of successive governments that China, with its significant trade levels with New Zealand, might take offence at statements made about the threat that it posed to New Zealand's national security.

It is not therefore possible to answer the question, “Do the government’s plans provide an answer to the threat that China poses?” That question is left hanging in the air because it is still not known what the government’s plans are.

In the next article, an attempt will be made to start with the basics and to identify the likely way in which the Chinese threat to New Zealand will be manifested, and then to examine how New Zealand could defend itself against that threat. Until that is done, New Zealanders will not be able to judge the likely effectiveness of the proposed government measures. They need to, because rearming New Zealand requires the government to have the greatest level of support possible from New Zealanders, and that is not going to be forthcoming without it communicating its intentions for defence with transparency, clarity and candour.