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WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE?

The Revival of New Zealand–United States Maritime Cooperation

Steven Paget

In unveiling the U.S. “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific in November 2011, then-President Barack H. Obama signaled a “strategic re-balancing” toward the region.¹ The American pronouncement was made amid great fanfare—and some controversy. Attention soon was drawn to Australia by the announcement that 2,500 U.S. Marines would rotate through Darwin and use their time there to engage with regional security partners. Although Alex Burns and Ben Eltham assessed that Australia might “have been expected to welcome greater U.S. involvement in the Pacific region,” New Zealand’s response always was likely to be subtler, given the long shadow cast by the 1985 Australia–New Zealand–United States (ANZUS) crisis.² However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, New Zealand’s defense relationship with the United States gradually has been rebuilt.

In reference to the bilateral relationship, Mark D. Gilbert, then the U.S. ambassador to New Zealand, declared in 2016, “If the relationship is not in the best place it has been, it is in a really good place.”³ While describing the impending visit of a U.S. Navy (USN) ship to New Zealand as “a further demonstration of the strength of our close relationship, our friendship, and our shared values,” New Zealand’s then prime minister John P. Key responded to a question about the implications of the event by stating in 2016, “If the question is will there be [a] step back into ANZUS then the answer is no. We run an independent foreign

policy. . . . [W]e make . . . decisions on a case by case basis of what we want to do.”⁴

If New Zealand’s interaction with the United States is to be decided on a case-by-case basis, one area of vital significance is maritime cooperation.

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Indeed, the inherently maritime emphasis of the New Zealand *Defence White Paper 2016* brought the issue into sharp focus. As Euan Graham has commented, “The re-anchoring of naval ties commands a symbolic premium, given that Wellington’s 1980s ban on U.S. nuclear-propelled warships from visiting Kiwi ports was the trigger for New Zealand’s suspension from the ANZUS alliance.”⁵

It is important, in both the domestic and international contexts, that New Zealand’s contribution to addressing regional and international security is recognized, but also that the benefits of multinational cooperation for New Zealand are understood. From a maritime perspective, a revival of ANZUS relations—in practice, if not in name—is, and will continue to be, vital to allowing the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) to fulfill the ever-increasing range of tasks expected of it. A number of impending capability-replacement decisions provide an opportunity to enhance New Zealand’s maritime capability and, in turn, increase the capacity of the NZDF to cooperate with forces and government agencies of the United States.

Aside from the national and binational benefits, maritime cooperation between New Zealand and the United States is valuable for the region. As former U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter observed, the “Asia-Pacific security network weaves every state’s relationships together to help their militaries do more, over greater distances, more efficiently,” which is of great significance, as the region “is increasingly becoming the world’s economic, political, and military center of gravity.”⁶ The nature of the operating environment means that maritime cooperation is especially important.

The need for cooperation with Australia is obvious and has been covered extensively.⁷ The importance of cooperation between New Zealand and the United States in the maritime domain has received significantly less attention. This article addresses the challenges facing New Zealand in the maritime domain and the subsequent necessity for cooperation. It will examine how current and future capability decisions will shape the NZDF’s ability to cooperate and will affect the achievement of interoperability. The shifting defense relationship between the two nations will be examined to demonstrate that a platform for enhanced cooperation has been created, before the challenges posed by the strategic rivalry between China and the United States are considered. The article will conclude that cooperation between New Zealand and the United States in the maritime domain, conducted in accordance with—as opposed to in contradiction to—New Zealand’s independent foreign policy, will be essential in addressing the ever-growing challenges. New Zealand represents a pertinent subject for study, as its case enables the examination of a fluctuating defense relationship with the United States and provides a small-state perspective on maritime cooperation with a large power.

SMALL NAVIES AND MULTINATIONAL COOPERATION

The Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) frequently is described as a small navy, and Eric Grove has classified it as being in rank 4—an “adjacent force projection” navy—which amounts to its being able to “project force well off shore.”⁸ Owing to their size and limited resources, such navies can find it difficult to realize their “strategic ambitions.”⁹ Nevertheless, the pressure on small navies is only likely to increase. Lars Wedin has contended that “small navies will see enlarged requirements as a result of the increased importance of the sea in the context of the blue society—a society dependent on the sea and its use.”¹⁰ The existence of a “capability-capacity crunch,” however, means that “the gap between available and required military capabilities for effect is growing.”¹¹ The capability gap is a particularly pressing concern for small navies. Ian Speller, Deborah Sanders, and Michael Mulqueen have written that “all navies face resource constraints but small navies, denied economies of scale, need to deal with these in particular ways. Traditional approaches include multinational collaboration, role specialisation, the development of niche capabilities, design compromises and the abandoning of roles and/or capabilities that no longer appear vital.”¹²

Small navies such as the Republic of Singapore Navy and the RNZN have sought, as a result, to cooperate with international partners on a regular basis.¹³ Ultimately, it is highly likely that the RNZN and the wider NZDF will operate with the U.S. Navy with “increasing frequency both within and beyond the immediate region” across a range of tasks.¹⁴

MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS AND RESPONSE

Then-Chief of Navy Rear Admiral John O. Martin emphasized that the RNZN makes myriad contributions, declaring in 2018 that “[t]o focus on combat capability and the shortcomings of various vessels in high-intensity maritime combat is to underestimate the roles that make up New Zealand’s contributions to maritime security.”¹⁵ New Zealand has afforded the maritime domain increasing importance. The *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018* identified three capability areas that “will require attention,” including “[m]aritime domain awareness and response, particularly in New Zealand’s neighbourhood but also further afield.”¹⁶ The emphasis on the maritime domain inevitably will require cooperation with the United States, both regionally and beyond. Reuben Steff and Francesca Dodd-Parr have observed, “For NZ, there is perhaps no more important element of US power than its naval dominance, which enables the free flow of trade across the high seas, and, in extremis, could be utilised to aid NZ should its territorial integrity be threatened or a national emergency occur.”¹⁷

The tasks that the NZDF is expected to undertake are both wide-ranging and diverse. The protection of resources increasingly is one of the most widely

reported maritime-security challenges in the region. Although the problem is more prevalent elsewhere, New Zealand is not immune to the threat of illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing. The New Zealand government has assessed that its exclusive economic zone will become a “more attractive area” for IUU fishing as “global pressure on fisheries” increases.¹⁸ The protection of resources expands beyond the threat of IUU fishing to include a range of issues, such as the preservation of undersea minerals and conservation of the environment. These challenges require close collaboration among the NZDF, the New Zealand Customs Service, the New Zealand Police, the Ministry for Primary Industries, and the Department of Conservation. In 2013, Martyn J. Dunne, then the New Zealand high commissioner to Australia, declared, “[O]nly through inter-agency coordination can the best results occur, especially when constrained by tight financial circumstances. The benefits are immense, the outcomes obvious and tangible.”¹⁹ Interagency cooperation is fundamental to the provision of an effective response in the national context, but New Zealand’s wider responsibilities necessitate a broad range of multinational interactions.

These responsibilities include the ongoing challenge of protecting natural resources throughout the South Pacific. Jenny Hayward-Jones has noted that while Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands have a diverse array of natural resources, the majority of Pacific Island countries rely on fisheries, tourism, and remittances. Maritime resources, particularly fish stocks, are the lifeblood of many Pacific Island nation economies, with the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency estimating that the total value of the fishing catch within the Pacific Islands region in 2010 was US\$5 billion.²⁰ The abundance of marine resources has led to an increase in IUU fishing, resulting in annual losses of approximately NZ\$400 million. The competition for resources and the detrimental effects of IUU fishing may contribute to instability, which the *Defence White Paper 2016* identified as having the potential to have “flow-on effects for New Zealand and the immediate region within the next 25 years.”²¹

New Zealand and the United States are members of a range of regional organizations, such as the Pacific Community and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme. Both countries have commitments to fisheries enforcement as part of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and contribute to regional maritime surveillance through the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group.²² The protection of other resources, including deep-sea minerals such as seafloor massive sulfides, cobalt-rich ferromanganese crust, and polymetallic nodules, may add a further layer to regional maritime-security challenges.²³ The existence and functioning of the U.S.-led Oceania Maritime Security Initiative, which sees USN vessels transiting through the region engage in patrols to supplement U.S. Coast Guard maritime law-enforcement operations

and cooperate with Australia, France, New Zealand, and the Pacific Island nations, are a testament to the need to work together.²⁴ As the pressure on the maritime resources of the Pacific increases, enhanced cooperation in surveillance and enforcement will become ever more significant.

The ongoing meteorological and geological hazards the Pacific region faces are likely to lead to an increased requirement to conduct humanitarian-assistance and disaster-relief (HADR) operations. The New Zealand government has assessed that the “impacts of climate change will require more humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,” and that the NZDF will “be faced with more frequent and concurrent operational commitments, which will stretch resources and may reduce readiness for other requirements.”²⁵ The Washington Declaration (2012) specifically affirmed that New Zealand and the United States are “prepared to respond in accordance with national approval processes in a timely and effective way to the range of contingencies that may arise in the region, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and multilateral cooperation with regional partners’ armed forces.”²⁶ By comparison with Australia and, especially, the United States, New Zealand’s capacity to respond is modest. Although New Zealand still can make an invaluable contribution, including taking on a leadership role, cooperation with other nations has been important and will become ever more so if crises increase in both frequency and intensity.

The stability of Pacific Island countries is a central concern of New Zealand and the United States. Although the *Defence White Paper 2016* assessed that the South Pacific was “unlikely to face an external military threat in the foreseeable future,” it noted that the potential for instability remained.²⁷ The challenges presented by drug, firearms, and human trafficking; IUU fishing; and environmental disasters all have the potential to undermine stability. Equally, demographic pressures and fluctuating employment levels could contribute to the diminishment of political and social cohesion. Instability in the region would require a response from New Zealand and, potentially, the United States. Given the nature of the operating environment, any response will require significant maritime elements.

In view of the potential for instability and New Zealand’s “enduring interest” in the South Pacific, the *Defence White Paper 2016* projected that the NZDF likely would have to “deploy to the region over the next ten years, for a response beyond humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.”²⁸ The *Defence Capability Plan 2019* placed emphasis on “increasing the effectiveness of the Defence Force to operate in the South Pacific,” in line with the “Pacific Reset” introduced by the coalition government.²⁹

While the United States perhaps does not accord the matter the same priority as does New Zealand, it shares the same concerns. Andrew Hyde has asserted,

“The United States has been a steady force for and contributor to social, economic and political development throughout the Pacific region.”³⁰ U.S. diplomats have called for increased engagement and have sought “a regional architecture flexible enough to respond to the material and non-material flows—of money, information, weapons, goods, drugs, and people—that are transforming the region.”³¹ Although there was some skepticism about then-President Donald J. Trump’s “free and open” Indo-Pacific policy, the concept was based on the “simultaneous enhancement of America’s economic engagement, security cooperation, and rule-making potential.”³²

The commitment to stability has been demonstrated over the past few decades, particularly by the American and New Zealand contributions to the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) in 1999. Regarding this Australian-led initiative, much has been made of the contributions of the Australian Defence Force and, to a lesser degree, those of the NZDF. One report has noted, “No other state was willing to match either Australia or New Zealand’s combat contributions to East Timor in the crucial first weeks of the operation.”³³ However, the broader multinational coalition played an invaluable role. First and foremost, American diplomatic efforts with Jakarta paved the way for INTERFET’s operations.³⁴

While U.S. involvement was crucial at the strategic level, it also served as a force multiplier at the operational and tactical levels. During the initial amphibious operations, an assortment of vessels, including from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, conducted protection operations to ensure accomplishment of the mission.³⁵ The composition of the deployed forces was of paramount importance and the result of effective coordination. The deployment of U.S. forces was designed specifically to ensure the provision of unique capabilities that the coalition did not possess otherwise.³⁶ The presence of the Aegis cruiser USS *Mobile Bay* and elements of a U.S. Navy-Marine amphibious ready group that contained 2,500 Marines created a deterrent effect and demonstrated “alliance solidarity.”³⁷ INTERFET confirmed the significance of collaboration between Australia and New Zealand, but it also emphasized the ongoing, but perhaps more subtle, importance of cooperation with the United States.

The need to be proactive rather than reactive has culminated in the maritime-diplomacy initiative known as the Pacific Partnership, which seeks to provide humanitarian and civic assistance, as well as to enhance stability in the region. Despite being multinational in nature, the Pacific Partnership is led principally by the United States. New Zealand has made increasingly important contributions during recent iterations, including undertaking leadership roles. In 2013, for example, New Zealand served as the phase lead for the Republic of Kiribati and Solomon Islands legs of the partnership’s exercise that year.³⁸ The Pacific Partnership is a triservice endeavor, but maritime assets, particularly amphibious

vessels, play an essential role. Ultimately, collaboration in the Pacific is mutually beneficial for New Zealand and the United States.

As a “longstanding contributor to international peace and security,” New Zealand will continue to deploy the NZDF on a global basis.³⁹ The *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018* laid this out explicitly: “As challenges to the international rules-based order intensify—from our neighbourhood to the Asia-Pacific and further afield—it will remain in New Zealand’s vital interest to act in support of this order.”⁴⁰ The *Defence Capability Plan 2019* subsequently stated as follows: “[D]eployments beyond New Zealand’s immediate region will most likely continue to be as part of operations led by New Zealand’s security partners, or as part of United Nations–mandated peace support operations. The Defence Force must be able to operate effectively with New Zealand’s key security partners, in particular with our ally Australia.” While New Zealand will continue to conduct an independent foreign policy, NZDF deployment to multinational operations likely will involve interaction with the United States as one of the “key security partners.”⁴¹

The recognition that “New Zealand’s economic prosperity depends upon open sea, air, and electronic lines of communication” has highlighted the significance of counterpiracy and maritime-security operations.⁴² New Zealand so far has made modest but worthwhile commitments to such operations. For example, HMNZS *Te Mana* contributed to NATO’s counterpiracy task force as part of Operation OCEAN SHIELD from late 2013 to early 2014. Even before *Te Mana*’s deployment, an RNZN boat crew aboard HMAS *Melbourne* participated in operations in the Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Oman.⁴³

The NZDF has been a useful contributor to the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a “United States–led international naval coalition” that conducts maritime-security operations in the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, and Red Sea.⁴⁴ Between August 2014 and December 2015, a rotating Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) detachment and an Orion surveillance aircraft flew 1,400 hours during the course of 174 maritime-surveillance flights with the CMF. Operating as part of Combined Task Force 150, which was commanded at the time by Canada but with a combined Australian and Canadian staff, the Orion worked with ships from Australia, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and various Middle East nations.⁴⁵

Although New Zealand’s previous contributions to counterpiracy operations had been limited, the *Defence White Paper 2016* forecast that the commitment of forces was “likely to be enduring” owing to a “lack of progress towards addressing some of the underlying causes of piracy in the region.”⁴⁶ That prediction was realized by the deployment of an RNZAF Orion and 55 personnel on 10 February 2017 to support CMF counterpiracy and counter-human- and -drug-trafficking operations for a period of twelve months.⁴⁷ Multinational cooperation

is the common denominator across the diverse array of responsibilities that are expected of the NZDF.

CAPABILITIES THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVELY OPERATING WITH OTHERS

Air Marshal Kevin Short, Chief of Defence Force, determined in 2018 that the NZDF must be “integrated internationally with our military partners and like-minded nations.”⁴⁸ The capability decisions that have been taken already, as well as those that are imminent, will provide further avenues for cooperation with multinational partners, including the United States. The New Zealand government has considered the Frigate Systems Upgrade project to be important for the *Anzac*-class frigates to provide “world class combat systems,” “a global response option for long duration operations,” and “interoperability with New Zealand’s key defence partners.”⁴⁹ The modernization and upgrade of the frigates have led to an extension of their expected service life beyond 2030, but their subsequent replacement also will create further opportunities to enhance interoperability.

Similarly, the *Defence Capability Plan 2019* reasoned that the July 2018 decision to purchase four P-8A Poseidon maritime-patrol aircraft to replace six P-3K2 Orion aircraft, in addition to continuing to ensure a maritime-patrol capability, would provide “a common strategic air surveillance capability with key Defence partners following the withdrawal from service of the P-3 Orion fleet.”⁵⁰ Euan Graham emphasized further that “possessing a meaningful, deployable capability allows New Zealand to retain some influence among its allies and partners, rather than free riding on its presumed geographical isolation. Shared values matter, but intelligence sharing is highly transactional. New Zealand’s P-8s will help convince partners of its continuing value within the Five Eyes [an intelligence alliance among Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States].”⁵¹

The delivery of the first P-8A is scheduled for April 2023, with the entire fleet expected to reach final operating capability by 2025.⁵² While the aircraft can and will be used for independent operations, interoperability with Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which also will operate the aircraft, is an important consideration.

A second sealift vessel, which will operate alongside HMNZS *Canterbury*, will be acquired in the mid-to-late 2020s to enhance the sealift capacity of the NZDF. The second ship, which is likely to be a landing platform dock or similar, is planned as an “enhanced sealift vessel,” with greater lift capacity than *Canterbury*, and will include hospital facilities, planning spaces, and self-defense capabilities.⁵³ The intended acquisitions demonstrate the increased significance that Australia and New Zealand attach to “amphibiosity.”⁵⁴

The enhanced sealift capability will also improve the New Zealand Defence Force's amphibious operations. Through the provision of a well dock, it will be able to conduct operations in a wider range of sea conditions, and will have the size and capacity to carry large equipment, and sufficient aviation capacity to allow extended, long duration operations. Its size will also provide for the transport of a larger number of personnel, allowing for the value of the increased size of the New Zealand Army to be realised.⁵⁵

The plans for acquiring enhanced platforms have been accompanied by efforts to further the conceptual aspects of amphibious operations. For example, NZDF personnel have participated in the Pacific Amphibious Leaders Symposium, which “brings together senior leaders of allied and partner militaries with significant interest in the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region to discuss key aspects of maritime/amphibious operations, capability development, crisis response, and interoperability.”⁵⁶ Long-term planning also sees *Canterbury* being replaced with a more capable vessel when it is withdrawn from service in the 2030s, to ensure that concurrency is maintained.⁵⁷

The 2019 introduction of the dive and hydrographic vessel HMNZS *Manawanui* and the fleet tanker HMNZS *Aotearoa* further increased the RNZN's capacity. *Manawanui* supports “underwater search and recovery, hydrographic survey, explosive ordnance disposal, mine counter-measures capability, training and maritime presence, rapid environmental assessment, and route survey.”⁵⁸ The ship was described by then-Defence Minister Ron Mark as “a game changer domestically and for our South Pacific region.”⁵⁹ As a secondhand vessel, the ship has only a fifteen-year service life, but there are plans to replace it with a similar vessel in the 2030s.⁶⁰

There also will be important changes to the NZDF's patrol capabilities. The New Zealand government adjudged that while the “inshore and offshore patrol vessels [OPVs] have provided significant value during their service lives,” they are “increasingly operationally limited as the ships age and regulations evolve.”⁶¹ As a result of the increased likelihood of operating in the South Pacific and the Southern Ocean, two inshore patrol vessels—HMNZS *Pukaki* and HMNZS *Rotoiti*—were retired on 17 October 2019.⁶² A Southern Ocean patrol vessel is due to be acquired in the mid-2020s to enable the OPVs to be concentrated on Pacific operations.⁶³ The vessel will be ice strengthened to “cope better with the 20-metre waves in the Southern Ocean, and thus also contribute to . . . protecting Antarctica.”⁶⁴ The fate of the remaining two inshore patrol vessels will be determined prior to the commissioning of the Southern Ocean patrol vessel. The *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018* ultimately concluded as follows:

It is . . . critical for the Defence Force to maintain and develop capabilities that support effectively operating with others. This involves developing complementary

capabilities as appropriate, ensuring mutual familiarity (developed through personnel exchanges and exercising), and the compatibility of communications and command and control systems. Interoperability is key to New Zealand's strong international reputation as a valued and credible defence partner and ally.⁶⁵

Basil Germond has summarized, "Post-modern seapower is conceived as a collective effort with shared benefits, rather than a zero-sum game."⁶⁶ The challenges facing the NZDF, especially the RNZN, point to the benefits of a "collective effort with shared benefits." However, despite the trend toward increasing cooperation on a regional and global basis, inevitably there are limits for New Zealand.

NEW ZEALAND'S CONTEMPORARY "ANZUS" RELATIONS

New Zealand's defense relationship with the United States has been somewhat tumultuous. The nadir of New Zealand–U.S. defense relations came in 1985 when the Labour government, led by Prime Minister David R. Lange, refused a visit from USS *Buchanan* (DDG 14) as part of the policy of preventing nuclear-powered or -armed ships from entering the nation's ports. In response, the United States withdrew its security guarantee and ended defense cooperation. Glenn Palmer and T. Clifton Morgan have asserted that "New Zealand concluded that a continuation of its participation in ANZUS was too costly and that the maintenance it received from the United States was not worth the cost of the required policies."⁶⁷ But if the formal alliance was deemed too costly in 1985, developments over the past two decades have indicated that New Zealand is becoming ever more cognizant of the benefits of a firmer defense relationship with the United States.

The contribution of New Zealand's Special Air Service to the conflict in Afghanistan improved relations and served as a platform for increased defense cooperation. The Wellington (2010) and Washington (2012) Declarations provided for enhanced defense cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain.⁶⁸ Since then, in a symbolic move, HMNZS *Canterbury* docked at Pearl Harbor during RIMPAC 2014, which marked the first time a New Zealand ship had done so since the 1985 ANZUS crisis. The NZDF's participation in RIMPAC (as well as a range of other exercises, such as DAWN BLITZ and BOLD ALLIGATOR) also has engendered greater cohesion between the militaries of New Zealand and the United States.⁶⁹ Consequently, the *Defence White Paper 2016* asserted that the relationship with the United States has "reached a depth and breadth not seen for 30 years."⁷⁰ New Zealand's increasing integration into RIMPAC was highlighted by the 2018 iteration, between 27 June and 2 August, when the RNZN for the first time served as a commander (of undersea mine countermeasures in the Southern California area of operations) and also won the Naval Surface Fire Support Rodeo

competition.⁷¹ The burgeoning defense relationship prompted Jack Georgieff to contend that New Zealand and the United States are “allies in all but name.”⁷² While the two nations are not formal allies, New Zealand’s status as a “regional strategic partner” is testament to the increasingly close relationship.⁷³

Notably, the U.S. Navy was invited to participate in the November 2016 International Fleet Review in Auckland. The visit of USS *Sampson* (DDG 102) marked the first time a USN ship had docked in New Zealand since the ANZUS crisis. The significance of the visit as planned would have been more symbolic than practical, by further indicating the strengthening of U.S.–New Zealand military ties, but as events unfolded *Sampson*’s assistance to the recovery efforts following the 7.8-magnitude Kaikoura earthquake of 14 November 2016 demonstrated the benefits of a close relationship. The NZDF deployed a range of assets, including HMNZ ships *Canterbury*, *Endeavour*, *Te Kaha*, and *Wellington*. They were supplemented by an international contribution that was made feasible by the imminent International Fleet Review. Support was provided by the Australian frigate HMAS *Darwin*, the Canadian frigate HMCS *Vancouver*, and *Sampson*, whose helicopters transported aid to the disaster-struck areas. In addition, a USN P-3 and a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force P-1 aerial-surveillance aircraft also provided assistance.⁷⁴

In total, 216 tons of disaster relief, including thirteen tons of food, three hundred kilograms of blankets, five hundred kilograms of telecommunications equipment, four tons of medical supplies, and portable pumps and generators, were transported.⁷⁵ *Sampson*’s helicopters lifted almost five tons of aid across the course of fourteen flights, the ship’s rigid-hull inflatable boats evacuated civilians, and twenty-six personnel assisted with efforts ashore.⁷⁶ In a further demonstration of the importance of cooperation and interoperability, *Endeavour* refueled *Sampson* and other international ships.⁷⁷

Granted, the ships were fortunately placed, owing to the impending International Fleet Review, but that did not detract from the multinational contribution. On 22 November 2016, following the U.S. Navy’s contribution to the relief effort, then–Prime Minister Key proclaimed that despite “differences of opinion on different issues,” such as trade and climate change, “New Zealand and the United States are the very best of friends”; he cited *Sampson*’s visit as “proof of how strong that relationship really is.”⁷⁸ Although the example was much smaller in scale, the crew of the U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker *Polar Star* (WAGB 10) also was able to assist with patrols ashore during the Port Hills fire in February 2017, while the ship was docked at Lyttelton.⁷⁹ Aside from demonstrating the utility of NZDF assets during disaster-relief efforts in New Zealand, the Kaikoura earthquake and, to a much lesser degree, the Port Hills fire highlighted that international assistance is invaluable.

In a further demonstration of the spirit of goodwill that exists between New Zealand and the United States and the mutual benefits of the reemerging partnership between their navies, HMNZS *Te Kaha* was dispatched to assist the *Nimitz* (CVN 68) carrier strike group (CSG) following the collision between USS *Fitzgerald* (DDG 62) and a Philippine-flagged containership off the Japanese coast on 14 June 2017. In announcing *Te Kaha*'s assignment to the *Nimitz* CSG, New Zealand's then defense minister Mark P. Mitchell stated that "the United States was very quick to help here in New Zealand when the earthquake struck in the South Island. . . . This was deeply appreciated."⁸⁰ Rear Admiral William D. Byrne Jr., USN, then the commander of the *Nimitz* CSG, praised the integration of *Te Kaha* as a "great honor" and indicated his hope for "future cooperative endeavors between our two countries."⁸¹

Subsequently, *Te Kaha* was awarded a U.S. Meritorious Unit Citation for its swift and valued contribution.⁸² Like *Sampson* in 2016, *Te Kaha* fortuitously was placed—in *Te Kaha*'s case, near Japan as part of the RNZN Naval Task Group Asian deployment—but the proximity of RNZN and USN vessels in times of crisis only serves to emphasize further the need for and likelihood of collaboration. Scott P. Brown, at the time U.S. ambassador to New Zealand, reflected that the maritime responses to the Kaikoura earthquake and the *Fitzgerald* collision serve as "a real testimony to both the depth of our relationship, and the strides we have made towards increasing interoperability."⁸³

New Zealand's close relationship with the United States in Antarctica includes a contribution to the Joint Logistics Pool. That relationship has the potential for enhancement following the 18 July 2016 announcement that the New Zealand government would spend NZ\$493 million on a new ice-strengthened and winterized naval tanker optimized for operations in Antarctica. Then-Defence Minister Gerard A. Brownlee declared, "This will allow it to deliver fuel and other goods to support Scott Base and McMurdo Station, during summer months once an icebreaker has cleared a path. . . . It will increase New Zealand's contribution and help further demonstrate our long-term commitment to the Antarctic Joint Logistics Pool with the United States."⁸⁴ Furthermore, the commitment in the *Defence White Paper 2016* to purchase a new ice-strengthened Southern Ocean OPV will increase New Zealand's patrol capacity in the area. In addition, collisions and near misses during the present decade also have highlighted the search-and-rescue responsibilities that Australia, New Zealand, and the United States share in the Southern Ocean.⁸⁵ Ultimately, the ability to cooperate with the United States in Antarctica remains an important consideration for New Zealand.

Not only is a focus on preserving and furthering maritime cooperation with the United States a matter of pragmatism, but it also appears to have political and public approval. Following a poll in May 2016 about whether the visit of a

USN ship to New Zealand would be welcomed, which revealed that 75 percent of respondents were in favor and just 20 percent against, then–Prime Minister Key expressed his personal desire to see a vessel conduct a visit.⁸⁶ Significantly, the government announced that the United States would not be asked to confirm whether the ship was nuclear armed, and Andrew J. Little, then the opposition leader, indicated that he would pursue the same policy if in power. While the election of President Trump may have led to a more cautious attitude among both politicians and the general public, there is still momentum behind maritime cooperation. In February 2017, New Zealand granted permission for *Polar Star* to dock at Lyttelton following operations in Antarctica, as mentioned above.⁸⁷ Candy Green, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Wellington, noted that discussions about future ship visits “will focus on practical cooperation, friendship, and advancing shared interests.”⁸⁸ When *Polar Star* docked in New Zealand for a third time in Wellington, in February 2019, two RNZN officers were on board, having spent time observing operations in Antarctica.⁸⁹

The election of the coalition government in October 2017 led to less public emphasis being placed on the significance of the relationship with the United States, but the importance of cooperation has not diminished. During a speech in Washington, DC, in December 2018, then–Deputy Prime Minister Winston R. Peters pointed to the need for cooperation between New Zealand and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region generally and the southwest Pacific in particular, noting that “[t]here are few relationships better than that between New Zealand and the United States. . . . Because of [our] common values and democratic traditions, it’s hardly surprising that our global interests so often correspond, and that we have repeatedly worked together in times of international crises and in the face of major global challenges. And we will continue to do so.”⁹⁰

The election of President Trump sparked widespread debate in Australia and New Zealand about the future of their respective relationships with the United States. President Trump’s anticipated transactional approach prompted far-reaching and challenging questions about the broader U.S.–New Zealand relationship—in particular, the implications of an American foreign policy likely to be more assertive came under consideration. Robert Ayson speculated in 2017 that New Zealand could move closer to China, depending on what policies the Trump administration pursued.⁹¹ Yet New Zealand adopted an approach of cautious positivity toward the United States, with Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles asserting that “although New Zealand holds concerns that the Trump Administration is a disrupting force within the international liberal order, New Zealand views the United States as a key Pacific partner.”⁹²

Despite the initial concerns about the potential effects of Trump’s presidency, fissures did not appear in the burgeoning defense relationship with the United

States. *Advancing Pacific Partnerships 2019*, which was released in October 2019, seemed to go further than previous documents with regard to the importance of the relationship with the United States, without stating so directly. The document emphasized a “like-minded partners” construction throughout, which Ayson has interpreted as “New Zealand’s bigger western partners”: Australia, France, and the United States.⁹³ Secretary of Defence Andrew Bridgman and Air Marshal Short declared as follows in the executive report of *Advancing Pacific Partnerships 2019*:

A range of partners maintain special relationships and constitutional obligations in the Pacific, and undertake efforts to support democratic values and the rules-based order throughout the broader Indo-Pacific region. New Zealand Defence seeks to work with these partners, alongside our Pacific partners, to make positive contributions to Pacific security, recognising that we can achieve more together than any of us can manage on our own. Cooperation among this constellation of countries will be most successful when it leverages respective strengths and accounts for complementary approaches to meet Pacific security priorities, as defined by Pacific partners, with the shared goal of fostering a secure, stable and resilient region.⁹⁴

As New Zealand considers the United States to be a “like-minded” partner with special relationships and obligations in the Pacific, it can be assumed that U.S.–New Zealand cooperation is perceived as a necessity.

The documents the New Zealand government released in 2019 reinforced the messages that have emanated from both Washington and Wellington. On assuming his role as U.S. Secretary of Defense, James N. Mattis thanked then–Defence Minister Brownlee for his country’s “support on various areas of mutual interest” and espoused “strengthening the U.S.–New Zealand relationship in the future.”⁹⁵ Interestingly, it was reported that the White House’s initial readout of the phone call between President Trump and New Zealand’s then prime minister S. William English referred to a “close relationship and bilateral alliance”; later it was amended to read that the leaders had “affirmed the close friendship and bilateral partnership” between New Zealand and the United States.⁹⁶ English revealed that the leaders had discussed New Zealand’s role “as a small country, a long way away, pulling our weight in the defence of our own people around the world and working alongside the US to contribute.”⁹⁷ While Brian J. Lynch has noted rightly that “[t]o our bankable credit, New Zealand has a reputation for an independent approach to international affairs and a readiness to do more than our share in meeting global commitments,” political capital has to be generated continually.⁹⁸

In view of the political bipartisanship and public goodwill, it would seem an opportune time to ensure that momentum is not lost, by strengthening maritime relations. The timing is particularly opportune given that New Zealand’s “domestic political context” has been judged to be “more amenable to the procurement

of more advanced maritime military capabilities.”⁹⁹ Cooperation with the United States in the maritime domain—whether formally or informally—is only likely to become more important in light of the challenges and threats raised in New Zealand’s *Defence White Paper 2016* and *Strategic Defence Policy Statement 2018*.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR? THE LIMITS OF ANZUS COOPERATION

New Zealand’s cooperation with the United States has not been and will not be absolute. As a result of the increased engagement between New Zealand and the United States, including involvement in Afghanistan, Terence C. O’Brien has assessed that “American expectations of New Zealand have . . . been heightened; but this paradoxically increases the need for New Zealand to cultivate and retain a judicious independent sense of balance in its foreign policy.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, New Zealand still must demonstrate that it is continuing to pull its weight nationally, regionally, and globally. In effect, New Zealand is faced with striking a fine balance between cooperation and overcommitment.

The biggest challenge presented is the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. China is the biggest market for New Zealand exports and, despite some recent turmoil, the economic relationship has continued to flourish alongside deepening defense relations with the United States. Maintaining that delicate balance has involved constant shuffling to keep the diplomatic seesaw level. One assessment noted that “China’s leaders appear to be untroubled by a more integrated military relationship between New Zealand and the United States, given the diminutive stature of Wellington’s forces.”¹⁰¹ However, New Zealand’s relationships with both China and the United States have drawn increasing attention.

The U.S. position was made clear in the 2015 *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*. “The United States has enduring economic and security interests in the Asia-Pacific region. And because the region—stretching from the Indian Ocean, through the South and East China Seas, and out to the Pacific Ocean—is primarily water, we place a premium on maintaining maritime peace and security.”¹⁰²

Escalations in tension between China and the United States have raised the specter of deepening Australian and New Zealand involvement. So far New Zealand has taken a cautious approach to the discord. In a speech at the National Defence University in China, then-Defence Minister Brownlee stated clearly in 2015, “We place great importance on both freedom of navigation and maintaining open trading routes. These are not just rhetorical statements. They are real and critical for New Zealand.”¹⁰³ Interestingly, the Washington Declaration includes a commitment to cooperate in the development of “deployable capabilities, in support of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific.”¹⁰⁴

Concerns that New Zealand may be compelled to take a stronger stance against China, including conducting freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs),

did not eventuate to any significant degree, as the Trump administration demonstrated a tendency to pursue unilateral action. Powles has noted that New Zealand has been able to exercise “strategic ambiguity,” given that, as Thomas Manch writes, “[w]hile the Trump administration has urged allies to follow its lead . . . it hasn’t waited to act in concert with traditional partners.”¹⁰⁵ While the Trump administration increased the frequency of FONOPs—which already had been enhanced under President Obama, reaching an all-time high in 2019, and notably involving the deployment of two CSGs to the South China Sea in 2020—New Zealand has not participated yet.¹⁰⁶

The election of Joseph R. Biden Jr. has prompted expectations that allies and partners of the United States, including New Zealand, may be pressured to be more assertive against China’s actions.¹⁰⁷ Ian A. Hill has assessed that “[t]he US will expect much from its allies and friends—including New Zealand—in their own dealings with China. In the increasingly contested South Pacific, Washington may look to its regional partners to do more of the heavy lifting.”¹⁰⁸ This well may include an increased focus on maritime operations. David Capie has warned, “There are going to be some aspects of the US-China relationship over the next few years that are going to force New Zealand towards some more zero-sum decision points . . . where you have to make a clearer choice.”¹⁰⁹

Richard Fontaine has suggested, optimistically, that “[b]anishing the anachronistic nuclear divide is the first step in an enhanced U.S.–New Zealand partnership that might one day see Auckland [Wellington] participating in key overflights or freedom of navigation exercises.”¹¹⁰ With New Zealand walking the tightrope between its bilateral relations with China and those with the United States, the issue of FONOPs is fraught with complications. A change in circumstances may prompt a shift in stance in the future, but in the short term it is unlikely that New Zealand will participate in U.S. FONOP patrols. Wayne D. Mapp has written, “Over the last 30 years, since the rupture of the ANZUS alliance, New Zealand has considered that it has less need to formally take sides in such contests. This is the essence of New Zealand’s independent foreign policy.”¹¹¹

In addition to the conduct of an independent foreign policy, New Zealand governments have recognized that capacity may preclude the NZDF’s involvement in some operations. In 2019, New Zealand responded to reported British approaches about supplementing the patrols in the Strait of Hormuz by declaring that it was unable to do so for practical reasons.¹¹² Then–Minister of Defence Mark announced that New Zealand “didn’t have any boats to send,” owing to its frigates being in Canada for upgrade. He added, “The bottom line is that I can barely struggle to keep two P3s [surveillance aircraft] flying. . . . I just don’t see that we have any spare capability right now to engage in that kind of a mission.”¹¹³ Capacity, as well as policy, always will shape New Zealand’s international commitments.

New Zealand's independent approach was emphasized by then–Defence Minister Mitchell in 2017, when he explained in regard to *Te Kaha*: “If the *Nimitz* was to go into an area that we wouldn't normally patrol or it doesn't fit in within our own policy then we would probably cut off and divert and see if there is something else they want us to do.”¹¹⁴ As part of the nation's independent approach and in view of the escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the New Zealand government consciously set clearly defined limits on the scope of *Te Kaha*'s attachment to the *Nimitz* CSG. Despite the deepening in New Zealand's ANZUS relations over recent decades, they remain selective rather than unlimited.

While the upward trajectory in defense cooperation may be called into question if the rivalry between the United States and China intensifies, regional maritime-security challenges and HADR initiatives represent low-hanging fruit in the wider New Zealand–U.S. relationship. Continued cooperation in those areas presents an opportunity both to maintain New Zealand's independent foreign policy and to ensure that the defense relationship endures despite any potential challenges posed by a more assertive American foreign policy. If the United States calls on allies and strategic partners to do more, New Zealand will need to be seen to undertake a fair share of the burden in the South Pacific and the wider region. Relieving pressure in the less-contentious aspects of the defense relationship may be sufficient to negate the risk of a blowout. ANZUS maritime cooperation within the confines of an independent foreign policy will allow New Zealand to maintain and deepen the defense relationship with the United States while eschewing direct involvement in the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. Although the maritime domain could be an arena of further tension in the future, it also offers a number of avenues for cooperation. The comparatively limited size of the NZDF means that the service can contribute in a number of important areas while remaining on the periphery of any escalating tension.

The 1985 ANZUS crisis is becoming an increasingly distant memory. Admiral Scott H. Swift, USN, then Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, declared pointedly in 2017, “I'm encouraged that the bonds of friendship forged between our navies during World War II continue to flourish today.”¹¹⁵ Then-Ambassador Brown observed in 2018, “New Zealand's reputation as a long-term partner and steady friend in time of need is not only renowned in the isles and atolls of the Pacific. The United States has long admired this Kiwi approach. And today we continue to work together for our shared values and common goals throughout the region and the world.”¹¹⁶

New Zealand appears, even without the formal bonds of alliance, to have been restored to the status of valued partner of the United States. While New Zealand, understandably, does not couch the relationship in terms of ANZUS, the wider

Five Eyes relationship offers a structure on which to anchor the bilateral and multilateral relationships. In observing that “[a]longside Australia, New Zealand benefits from close engagement with its other Five Eyes partners,” the New Zealand government proclaimed in 2018, “New Zealand values these relationships and is committed to strengthening and broadening them where possible through more regular interaction and cooperation.”¹¹⁷

In reference to New Zealand and the United States, Graeme Dobell has opined, “Both sides have shown a pragmatic ability to step around the ANZUS cadaver to try anew.”¹¹⁸ Events and decisions over the past decade have revived old elements of the relationship, and many of them have been reassembled to form a composite ANZUS bond. Tellingly, in 1967, Frederick L. W. Wood reasoned, “If we need American protection, it will be found not by insistence on the terms of ANZUS but by fostering that ‘relationship of confidence and common purpose.’”¹¹⁹ Cooperation in the maritime domain is one of the most obvious and most useful examples of a common purpose.

Progress over the preceding decade has resulted from and demonstrated New Zealand’s increased awareness of the ongoing relevance of a close defense relationship with the United States. In reference to the effect of the ANZUS crisis on New Zealand, Gerald C. P. Hensley has written, “Before that it had some ability to manoeuvre between its two partners, but the move towards greater independence left it much more reliant on Australian goodwill. Sitting on a two-legged stool proved rather less comfortable than a three-legged one.”¹²⁰

Improvements in all aspects of the trilateral defense relationship have the capacity to provide New Zealand with greater balance and flexibility. Increased collaboration in the maritime domain, in particular, has the potential to generate enhanced capacity to conduct operations, reduce financial burdens, and provide political credibility. With the range and level of threats, challenges, and opportunities continuing to expand and rise, the ability to band together with the United States can reduce the strain on the NZDF. The introduction of new maritime-patrol aircraft and vessels will be a significant boost; but, with the scale of the roles undertaken by the NZDF ever increasing, New Zealand runs the risk of swimming merely to tread water in the maritime domain.

A 2017 New Zealand editorial, following the visit of the two American ships, proclaimed, “Our helpful American friends are very welcome here, but it is good to extend the hand of friendship on our own terms, and not as a junior partner in an outdated alliance.”¹²¹ Rather than an attempt to hark back to a bygone era as a result of historical affinity, a move to enhance ANZUS maritime cooperation can provide a number of practical benefits. ANZUS relations can be situated clearly within the broader approaches to regional engagement by both nations. It need not be an exclusive club—it does not preclude cooperation with a range of other

nations, including not only Australia and the United States but France, Japan, the United Kingdom, the Pacific Islands, and ASEAN states.¹²² Nor does it require an unfettered commitment to U.S. endeavors within or beyond the region.

Ultimately, while many of New Zealand's nationally focused security and defense tasks will be undertaken unilaterally, there are few, if any, roles within and beyond the region that cannot be enhanced through increased cooperation with the United States. Commodore James Gilmour, RNZN, acknowledged in 2016, "We're aware—particular[ly] a country the size of New Zealand and . . . armed forces the size of New Zealand[']s—that almost nothing from a security perspective, meeting our responsibilities from a security perspective, will be dealt with on our own."¹²³ In advocating a federated approach to defense in the Asia-Pacific, Andrew Shearer has argued that closer cooperation among Australia, Japan, and the United States makes "compelling strategic, operational, budget, and political sense."¹²⁴ The same compelling logic points to the benefits of a federated approach to maritime-security challenges in the South Pacific. For New Zealand, the significance of an effective Pacific Partnership—both within and beyond the region—cannot be overestimated.

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