

NZ spells out strategic threats and priorities

Ewen Levick | Sydney

As news arrived that New Zealand will purchase four P-8A Poseidons, the Coalition government also released its [Strategic Defence Policy Statement](#). The document outlines the role of the NZDF and challenges it will be asked to face in the near future.

The fundamentals of NZ's defence policy remain unchanged. The NZDF's core remit is to protect NZ's territory and deploy power to a wide swathe of the Earth's surface, ranging from the Ross Dependency in Antarctica to sparse islands dotted along the Equator.

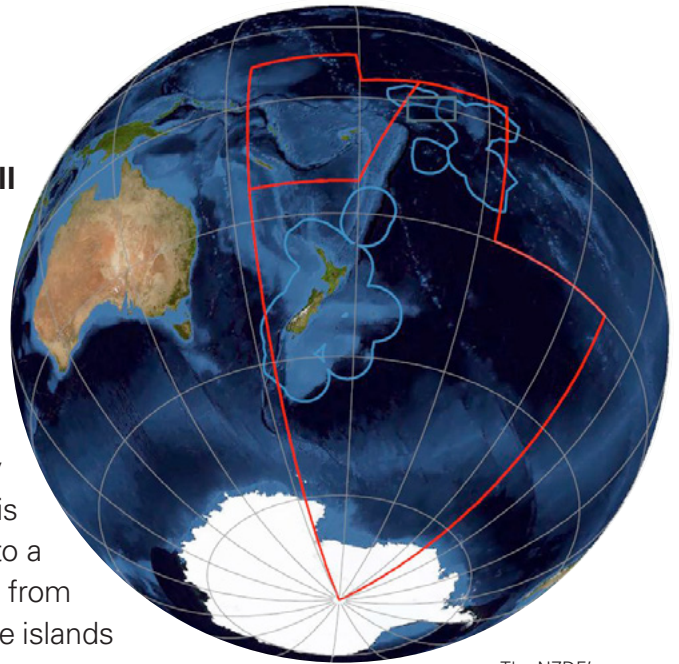
The size of this area of operations poses enormous challenges. If the NZDF's area of responsibility were transposed to the northern hemisphere, it would extend from the North Pole to southern Uganda. This is a big ask for a small military, which is operating across these vast distances in the face of increasingly adverse weather.

Yet there is no rest for the weary. The Statement foresees that the NZDF will be asked to undertake an "increasing number of routine and non-routine interventions in NZ's neighbourhood," particularly related to identifying and responding to maritime activities. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Statement explicitly highlights "maritime awareness and response" as one of three key capability areas requiring attention. The acquisition of four P-8As is a step in this direction.

The choice of P8-As, of course, has the additional benefit of maintaining a high level of interoperability with Australia. This remains one of NZ's foremost strategic priorities – Australia is mentioned 31 times in the 40-page document. The Statement asserts that "NZ has no better friend than Australia" and reaffirms NZ's commitment to "responding immediately should Australia be subject to an armed attack."

Interestingly, far less attention is paid to the US, and the attention that is paid is often ambiguous. The statement mentions that "uncertainty about the future international role of the US has disruptive implications." Although the document touches upon US efforts to support regional peace and security, it swiftly follows with references to the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific partnership and the Paris climate agreement. The unspoken implication is that Auckland will seek to invest in security relationships with other partners and in its own operational independence.

The second capability area the document identifies for improvement is Defence's ability to secure NZ's access to space. However, whilst the Statement



The NZDF's area of interest. NZDF

makes explicit reference to the NZDF's responsibility to ensure the physical safety of Earth-based infrastructure, it does not go into meaningful detail on what the equivalent responsibility is in space. It also blurs the domains of space and cyberspace in a way that risks overlooking physical threats to satellites and other space infrastructure.

In addition, the document acknowledges that NZ relies entirely on foreign space infrastructure for access to critical systems (including GPS). The Statement asserts that continued access to these systems depends on "the development of international norms that influence behaviour in space." Yet the Statement's

core argument is that the rules-based global order is under unprecedented pressure from "disruptive forces" and "pursuits of spheres of influences." The belief that international norms for responsible space behaviour will somehow emerge in the face of this pressure is self-contradictory and a serious strategic oversight.

The third capability area identified for improvement is cyber. The Statement notes that the 2016 White Paper did not expand the range of activities Defence was able to undertake. It seeks to address this shortcoming without treading on the toes of the Communications Security Bureau.

Overall, the Statement makes clear that NZ now looks out on a region that seems less stable than it once was. Numerous forces are eroding this stability; encroaching Chinese influence, attacks on Western liberalism and open societies from within, climate change, and complex disruptors to the nature of conflict

that threaten open states and weak states. Although the three highlighted areas for improvement provide valuable focus, the Statement is less clear on exactly how NZ will rise to this challenge beyond reaffirming its reliance on a weakening rules-based global order.

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No. 3 Squadron drop off soldiers from 2/1 RNZIR Recon platoon with an NH90 helicopter during Exercise Delta Patrol on the West Coast.

RNZAF VIA TWITTER