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BRIDGING THE DITCH

Reassessing the Australia–New Zealand alliance
for a more contested Indo-Pacific.

D. R. Garnett



◀ Loadmaster surveys
the Tasman Sea from the
ramp of a C-130 Hercules

The basis of our prosperity is imperilled by the collapse of globalisation and the prospect that rival trade blocs will be built on its ruins. The foundation of our security is undermined by the eclipse of the US-led rules-based order. And the power of our values is undermined by the persistence of strong authoritarian governments in many powerful states, and the rise of populism and the erosion of democratic norms in places where these once seemed strongest.

White, 2025

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract | 4 |
| Introduction | 6 |
| Methodology | 7 |
| Section One: The Indo-Pacific Epicentre | 8 |
| Framing the Region | 8 |
| A Faltering Environment | 9 |
| A Fundamental Reshaping | 9 |
| A Fracturing System | 13 |
| An Australasian View | 15 |
| Section Two: Alliances | 16 |
| Alliances as a Source of Resilience | 16 |
| Forms of Cooperation | 17 |
| The Geometry of Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific | 18 |
| The Anzac Case | 20 |
| Strategic Divergence and Asymmetry | 20 |
| Opportunities to Increase Integration | 21 |
| Section Three: Pathways to Bridge the Ditch | 23 |
| 1. Operationalise the Alliance - an Anzac Joint Operating Concept | 24 |
| ➤ <i>Define Combined Strategic Effects</i> | 25 |
| ➤ <i>Collaborate on Aligned Campaign Orchestration</i> | 25 |
| ➤ <i>Develop an Operational Capability Index</i> | 25 |
| ➤ <i>Coordinate Digital and Technical Interoperability Standards</i> | 25 |
| ➤ <i>Set Combined Command and Control Protocols</i> | 25 |
| ➤ <i>Align Capability Procurement and Training</i> | 25 |
| ➤ <i>Strengthen Joint Assessment Integration</i> | 26 |
| ➤ <i>Publish an Anzac Pacific Strategy</i> | 27 |
| 2. Reform Strategic Policy Architecture: Linked Strategies | 28 |
| 3. Anchor the Alliance in Political and Academic Institutions | 29 |
| Conclusion | 31 |
| References | 32 |
| Appendix A — AJOC Derivation Mapping Table | 0 |
| Appendix B — Case study: Solomon Islands Response | 0 |
| Appendix C — AJOC Structural Diagram | 2 |
| Appendix D — Interview Log | 3 |

Abstract

The view from Canberra and Wellington is of a fraught Indo-Pacific. National strategic outlooks illustrate converging pressures: great-power competition, climate-driven instability, rising coercion, and an eroding rules-based order. This report examines how these overlapping challenges are reshaping regional stability and straining the multilateral frameworks that underpin it. Against this backdrop, Australia and New Zealand are recalibrating their strategic postures. Although broadly aligned, evolving threats require a critical reassessment of their bilateral cooperation.

Focusing on defence interoperability and policy alignment, this report explores the Australia–NZ alliance as a potential site of strategic resilience.

It does so by drawing on interviews with defence and foreign affairs officials, policymakers and regional experts to identify alliance opportunities and challenges, and practical avenues for increased cooperation. The rich insight from this data reveals important nuance in the relationship: strategic divergence, the risks of over-integration, and an underemphasised Pacific perspective. However, it also reinforces deep alignment in security outlooks and priorities, highlighting key areas where greater integration could lead to significant security advantages to both nations. This is woven together into practitioner-oriented policy and strategy recommendations, anchored in the contemporary advice of some of the region’s leading experts. The findings suggest that deeper integration is not only desirable but increasingly necessary—if calibrated to leverage complementarity while protecting sovereign decision-making across the broad stakeholders of Indo-Pacific security.

This report critically examines whether a more integrated Australia–New Zealand alliance would address and shape emerging regional security threats, and outlines key reforms to make such integration more effective.

Strategic Recommendations Snapshot

From Trusted Partnership to Integrated Action: Three Strategic Reforms

To meet the demands of a more contested Indo-Pacific, Australia and New Zealand must elevate their alliance from habitual cooperation to deliberate interdependence. This report proposes **three mutually reinforcing reforms**, centred on a shared operating concept and supported by strategic, political, and institutional alignment.

1. Operationalise the Alliance through an Anzac Joint Operating Concept (AJOC)

The AJOC is the cornerstone reform: a living framework to capture and guide how Australia and New Zealand prepare, respond, and operate as a cohesive coalition. It functions as both a compass and a dashboard—setting coordinated strategic direction while enabling real-time awareness across the breadth of collaboration and interoperability initiatives.

Key components include:

- **Combined Strategic Effects:** Clearly articulated shared objectives to align planning and posture
- **Aligned Campaign Plans:** Pre-agreed roles and responsibilities across regional contingencies
- **Operational Capabilities Index:** Catalogue of joint capabilities and constraints
- **Command and Control Protocols:** Sovereignty-respecting mechanisms for rapid force integration
- **Digital Interoperability Standards:** Common systems for shared situation awareness
- **Joint Capability Working Groups:** Align acquisition, sustainment, and training pipelines
- **Anzac Joint Assessment Cell:** Integrate key analysis for timely shared understanding
- **Anzac Pacific Strategy:** Clearly establish where and when coordinated diplomacy, development, and presence is desired, based on unique strategic strengths and integrating Pacific perspectives

2. Reform Strategic Policy Architecture

Establish cross-referenced national strategies that embed the AJOC as a coordination mechanism.

- **Australia should publish a National Security Strategy** to align instruments of state power
- **New Zealand should publish a National Defence Strategy** to set durable defence direction
- Both should commit to regular joint strategic reviews and policy synchronisation

3. Anchor the Alliance in Political and Academic Institutions

Sustain momentum and coherence through enduring institutional mechanisms.

- **Establish a Trans-Tasman Security Council** to signal the depth of bilateral resolve, steer alliance decisions, and oversee AJOC orchestration
- **Create a Trans-Tasman Strategic Policy Centre** to connect scholars, officials, and civil society—supporting research, joint education, and public engagement

Introduction

We have sent or are about to send troops to the number of 40,000 for the defence of the Empire in Europe. All of these are armed and equipped exactly as are the British regiments.

Sir George Foster Pearce, Australian Minister for Defence, 1914

On 25 April 1915, on a beach in Western Türkiye, soldiers from two young nations stormed heavily defended positions together. The Australia New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) quickly became a symbol of shared hardship, innovation, and purpose. The ordeal of Gallipoli forged enduring national ties and contributed to the identity narratives of both countries.

Today, those ties face a new test. While the post–World War II order brought relative stability, the systems underpinning it are now fraying. Inter-state warfare has returned to Europe and the Middle East, emboldening authoritarianism and generating global economic impacts. In the Indo-Pacific, shifting power dynamics and climate disruption have heightened regional tension. As a trade-dependent region, the Indo-Pacific relies on a rules-based international order which is under increasing strain. These compounding pressures signal a potential inflection point—a critical moment of rapid change in the regional security architecture, at which existing alliance structures may no longer provide adequate deterrence or resilience

Converging threats have increased attention on alliance dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, yet the Australia–New Zealand (NZ) alliance remains under-examined in scholarly debate as a source of regional stability. While substantial attention has been paid to US-led alliances in the region (Ikenberry, 2013), and to emerging minilaterals (Bisley, 2024), the Australia–NZ alliance has largely escaped scholarly scrutiny as a site of strategic resilience (Wallis & Powles, 2024). **This report critically examines whether a more integrated Australia–New Zealand alliance would address and shape emerging regional security threats, and outlines key reforms to make such integration more effective.** The phrase “a more integrated alliance” refers to enhanced coordination across strategic planning, institutional structures, and operational activity, with the aim of developing a more cohesive and durable security partnership.

The report proceeds in three sections. The first establishes the problem by outlining the regional security environment, based on national outlooks in policy papers and defence strategy, expert assessment, and recent scholarship. The second section considers the alliance against an analytical framework, incorporating expert input to evaluate whether a stronger alliance would meaningfully mitigate the identified threats. The final section translates practitioner insights into actionable recommendations to reinforce Australia–NZ security cooperation. This report contributes to the reinvigoration of the trans-Tasman relationship by grounding contemporary strategic choices in the enduring foundations of the Anzac identity.

Methodology

Methodology maps the path from research question to findings but often overlooks the scholarly and strategic forces that shape the question itself (Cheng, 2019). This project began as an applied inquiry into Air Force interoperability but was reframed following initial consultations. It now asks whether the Australia–NZ alliance should be strengthened in response to emerging Indo-Pacific threats and, if so, how across the instruments of statecraft.

A qualitative, expert-informed approach was selected to generate rich, contextual insight rather than to test hypotheses statistically (Bryman & Burgess, 1999). Ten interviews were conducted with leading academics, former military personnel, foreign affairs and defence officials, and public commentators from Australia and NZ. Participants were purposively sampled to capture a broad spectrum of institutional perspectives across defence, diplomacy, and strategic studies—complemented by limited snowballing.¹

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide aligned to the research questions (regional threat perceptions; alliance utility; interoperability barriers; policy options). Interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised for analysis. All participants received an information sheet and consent form, and data management complied with Massey ethics requirements (Ethics notification: 4000030641).

Transcripts were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Initial open coding identified emergent themes² which were iteratively grouped into higher-order categories and mapped onto strategic, institutional, and operational dimensions of the alliance. Analysis was conducted using qualitative tools and manual cross-checking. To reduce interpretive bias, summaries were shared with participants for validation (member-checking) and discussed with supervisors. Triangulation with open-source documents (strategy papers, white papers, and public statements) further grounded interpretations. This interview data is fundamental to the central argument of this report – referenced throughout as “[XX]-Personal Communications (PC), 2025”.

The research design recognises certain limitations. Small, purposive samples constrain statistical generalisability; findings primarily capture the perspectives and threat perceptions of security community elites, rather than broader public opinion or the views of all regional actors. Insider-research dynamics present risks of operational sensitivity and institutional loyalty.³ These were mitigated by conducting interviews offsite and informally, and cross-referencing findings against public sources. Framing the inquiry through a traditional geopolitical lens may underrepresent some non-traditional or human-security concerns. Therefore, this report has identified areas for future research including perspectives from other Indo-Pacific states, non-government actors, or voices outside the formal security community.

Overall, this exploratory, problem-oriented design is appropriate for producing practitioner-relevant insights in a complex and evolving strategic environment. By centring expert judgements and triangulating across sectors, the study aims to generate actionable recommendations grounded in scholarly rigour and operational realism.

¹ Considered best practice (Vromen, 2005). Snowballing is sampling by participant referral (Noy, 2008).

² A word cloud analysis of common themes helped shape provisional findings.

³ Insider access involves risks and rewards: it can introduce bias but also yields tacit knowledge, networks and practice-based insight. Reflexivity, triangulation and confidentiality are essential. Ethically conducted insider research can help bridge academia and practice. See Frois et al. (2014); Rogers (2025).

Section One: The Indo-Pacific Epicentre

The Indo-Pacific is both a place and an idea.

Rory Medcalf, 2020a

Framing the Region

Section One will introduce the region and its contemporary challenges, before focussing on an Australasian viewpoint. The term Indo-Pacific denotes both a geographic expanse—from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific—and a normative frame that now shapes policy discourse. While embraced as a strategic rubric by many governments, the concept is not value-neutral: some scholars view it as a vehicle for managing China’s rise (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Ciuriak, 2020). Framing the Indo-Pacific as a single theatre risks obscuring intra-regional diversity and sidelining the priorities of smaller states (Latham, 2025). Nevertheless, the concept has become central to many regional strategic outlooks (ASEAN, 2019; DoD, 2023; Medcalf, 2020b; MoD, 2025).

The Indo-Pacific is a focal point of geopolitics for good reason. Often described as the “world’s engine of growth” (IMF, 2024), it hosts the world’s busiest sea lines of communication, drives 60% of global economic expansion, dominates global population growth, and houses several rising and major powers (Chan, 2022; Sora, et al., 2024). These structural features make the region attractive for revisionist and status-quo powers alike, because control over regional maritime access, supply chains, and institutions confers disproportionate political and economic leverage (Parker-Personal Communication (PC), 2025). Thus, the stakes for the region are immense. If diplomatic cohesion frays, conflict could be triggered by several flashpoints (Taylor, 2018). Conversely, sustained cooperation could underpin one of the most prosperous and integrated regional orders in modern history. As such, the Indo-Pacific is a test case for managing global interdependence amid intensifying rivalry.

This section diagnoses three converging stressors that drive strategic complexity across the Indo-Pacific.

They contribute to what Blaxland (PC-2025) described as a “polycrisis” —overlapping climate vulnerability, strategic competition, and the erosion of the rules-based order emerged as the key regional security challenges (DoD, 2023; Blaxland-PC, 2025; Buckley, 2021; Capie, 2024; MoD, 2023; Patman-PC, 2025). Exploring how these stressors interact will inform an assessment of Australian and NZ perspectives on regional threats.

What we're facing is a polycrisis; an overlap of great power competition, looming environmental catastrophe, a spectrum of governance challenges, all accelerated by the fourth industrial revolution.

Blaxland-PC, 2025

Diagnosing region-wide stressors supports linked National Security/Defence strategies (NSS/NDS), to clarify where regional cooperation and presence are most needed.

Operational Implication

A Faltering Environment

Climate change is a foundational security threat in the Indo-Pacific. Rising sea levels, intensifying cyclones, and coastal erosion directly undermine human welfare and state capacity—effects that are especially acute for low-lying Indo-Pacific states (Blaxland-PC, 2025; Glasser, 2022). The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) identified climate change as the “single greatest threat” to its members⁴ (PIF, 2018). Environmental shocks degrade infrastructure, livelihoods, and governance capacity—heightening dependency on external actors and creating vectors for coercion or influence (Azizian, 2022; Kapur, 2025).

These environmental impacts are unevenly distributed. For vulnerable island states and coastal communities for instance, the threat is existential (Blaxland-PC, 2025). This has been repeatedly affirmed by Pacific leaders (PIF, 2018, 2022). For larger states the consequences tend to lie in economics and logistics—resource pressure, humanitarian demands, constraints on manoeuvre, and maritime security issues (Singh & Marwah, 2022). Merzian (2019) warns of dissonance: “stepping up” operational engagement in the region while “stepping back” on climate mitigation risks undermining credibility. Failure to align security engagement with climate priorities risks alienating partners and opening seams that revisionist actors can exploit.

Climate-driven fragility reinforces the need for a coherent and inclusive Anzac Pacific Strategy, to build partner capacity, and an Anzac Joint Assessment Cell, to embed environmental indicators into shared contingency planning.

Operational Implication

A Fundamental Reshaping

*It doesn't matter if the elephants are fighting or fornicating,
the grass will always be trampled
Gleeson-PC, 2023*

Geopolitical behaviour by major powers is reshaping the Indo-Pacific. The United States (US) retains unparalleled security networks and forward presence that has long underpinned western security postures, but recent political volatility has introduced strategic ambiguity into those networks (Nye, 2025). China’s rapid economic rise, strategic statecraft, and military modernisation have bequeathed it with substantial regional influence. As Capie (PC-2025) observes, “China is doing what growing powers have always done: translating newfound

The three biggest law-breakers are all members of the UN Security Council: the United States, China, and Russia.

Patman-PC, 2025

economic strength into military heft”. This “exceptionalism” is well established (Parker-PC, 2025; Patman-PC, 2025); what threatens regional stability is this evolving into revisionism.

⁴ Of which includes NZ and Australia, although recent strategic assessments may suggest otherwise (DoD, 2024; MoD, 2025).

Patterns of behaviour suggest revisionist⁵ intent in parts of Chinese statecraft. Revisionism entails more than carve-outs; it involves efforts to alter territorial arrangements, institutional hierarchies and normative practices (Morgenthau, 1948). China’s rapid and opaque military expansion, its investments in alternative governance and financial instruments, and coercive diplomacy⁶ toward smaller neighbours together indicate an effort to reshape regional dependencies and institutions in ways that privilege Chinese strategic aims (Callahan, 2016; Fravel, 2019; Kuczynski et al., 2024; Schofield & Storey, 2009; Trần et al, 2024). Land reclamation and expansive militarisation in the South China Sea are inflaming tensions around contested features – this is vividly illustrated in the case of the artificial island constructed at Fiery Cross Reef seen at Figure 1. The repudiation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on maritime claims in 2016 is a key example of selective contestation of international norms (Glaser, 2016; Medcalf, 2020; PCA, 2016; Strating, 2020). Reshaping institutional architecture to create Sino-centric alternatives and strategic dependencies⁷ marks a revisionist logic with enduring strategic consequences (Fravel, 2019; Ikenberry, 2013; Lind, 2024; Mitter, 2022).

The prime existential threat to the prosperity of nations globally is competition with China... a global system dominated by China looks very different.

DoD Official-PC, 2025

China’s challenge to the geopolitical order emerged in this research as the single greatest threat to Indo-Pacific security. Nations feel the proximity of this threat differently, but as Capie (PC-2025) laments: “whether it is at the top of a nation’s list or not, the rapid change to regional security is caused by intensifying security competition”. Interviewed experts

broadly concurred that US–China strategic competition was a principal strategic concern⁸, with several noting it amplifies nearly all other regional risks (Capie-PC, 2025; MFAT Official-PC, 2025; DoD Official-PC, 2025). However, one expert cautioned against overstating the risk.

Structural rivalry coexists with areas of mutual interest and episodic cooperation worth preserving.

Several scholars maintain that China shows status quo tendencies, and that it’s “aims are unambiguous, enduring, and limited” (Kang et al., 2025; Song, 2015). Strategic assessments must therefore avoid determinism: analysts and policymakers should

evaluate behaviour in context and distinguish routinised competition from actions intended to alter territory, institutional hierarchies, or dependency relations. This requires granular, balanced analysis that guards against revisionism with transparent, reversible policy responses aligned with regional partners’ priorities (Weiss, 2014).

If you don't get the analysis right of the sort of world we live in, then your policies that you adopt in response to that perception... are likely to be wide of the mark as well.

Patman-PC, 2025

⁵ Although scholars broadly agree on the concept of revisionism, debate persists over the criteria that qualify a state as revisionist (see: Gilpin, 1981; Hopewell, 2025; Kuczynski et al. 2024). Using Krickovic’s (2022) typology, China can be further characterised as an “incremental revisionist” (Ward, 2017).

⁶ For a typology of Chinese “statecraftiness”, see Wallis et al (2023).

⁷ Chinese ambition to institutionalise exceptions is evident in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In Sri Lanka, state firms secured a 99-year lease on Hambantota Port with debt terms unattainable under World Bank frameworks (Cheung, 2019). Meanwhile, despite WTO commitments, Chinese entities engaged in large-scale cyber espionage, exfiltrating Western aviation technologies—a pattern confirmed in US Department of Justice indictments of PLA officers (Zhang, 2020). These practices show Beijing leveraging multilateral membership while selectively suspending adherence.

⁸ Although there was *some* deviation in attribution and severity, all 10 interviewees raised strategic competition as a regional threat. All of those who offered a “ranking” (5) placed it as the foremost threat.

Revisionism undermines already strained political and economic structures. Deterring it rests on three complementary elements: credible military denial to raise the costs of coercion; institutional resilience to uphold norms and enable collective responses; and sustained, locally legitimate partnerships that reduce external vulnerabilities (Osinga & Sweijs, 2021). With the international system weakened, small and middle powers must invest in regional capacity and adaptive alliance mechanisms to combat revisionism. The next section examines how a fracturing system—transactional great-power behaviour, institutional paralysis, and economic disruption—erodes collective ballast and raises the value of trans-Tasman regional responses.

This power competition strengthens the case for reformed NSS/NDS that are cross-referenced, Aligned Campaign Orchestration, and durable Political And Academic Institutions to balance assessments and support reflexive policy.

Operational Implication



Figure 1: Reclamation and militarisation of the disputed Fiery Cross Reef, South China Sea

A Fracturing System

Our security seemed assured by the apparently unchallengeable power of the United States, its manifest determination to uphold a global order in which aggression would be swiftly and surely punished, and its deep commitment to close allies, of which we were among the closest.

White, 2025

The United Nations Charter and the ideals it represents are in jeopardy. We have a duty to act. And yet we are gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction.

Guterres, 2022

Concurrent with power shifts, the institutions that sustain international order are under strain.⁹ As global power fragments into an increasingly multipolar system,¹⁰ the institutions that once upheld collective security and economic coordination face unprecedented strain, resulting in “states increasingly resorting to the use of force” (Parker-PC, 2025). Great

powers are increasingly exploiting institutional frameworks for narrow self-interest, undermining collective action and weakening normative constraints on aggression (Walt, 2020). The paralysis displayed by the UN Security Council amidst Russian and Israeli wars typifies the diminishing relevance of institutions once central to global stability (Graham, 2023). As the regulating forces of global order decline, so too does the predictability that underpinned decades of Indo-Pacific prosperity.

Changing US political proclivities are central to this decline. Blaxland (PC-2025) describes a US “transactional retreat from ideational leadership”. The resurgence of nationalism, withdrawal from multilateral institutions, and unpredictable trade policies are diluting US democratic credentials (Jackson & Brenes, 2025). This shift away from multilateral bodies and

I’m hard pressed to come up with a charitable framing of... the callousness and ruthlessness with which this vandalism was accomplished... feeding USAID into the woodchipper... [was] a psychopathic exercise in the destruction of American soft power.

Harris, 2025

an inward-looking view on security and trade is undermining the US’s position as underwriter of the rules-based international order. As Drysdale (2023) asserts: “It diminishes [US] credibility to demand China ‘follow the rules’ when it is bent on defenestrating the World Trade Order (WTO), an institution whose functioning smaller countries rely so much upon”. Retreat from international aid, UN bodies, and other institutions has surrendered immeasurable soft-power capital and impacted human and economic security in the Indo-Pacific.

⁹ No universally accepted definition of a rules-based international order exists, but it is used here for consistency with the stated security interests of Australia and NZ. Amongst scholars that accept it, some argue that it is more resilient than crisis narratives suggest (Risse, 2024; Weinhardt & Dijkstra, 2024), but a broad and growing body of literature, and this research, identifies significant structural pressures to be causing systemic decline (Adler-Nissen 2020; Benabdallah, 2024; Mearsheimer, 2019).

¹⁰ Multipolar system emergence is contested, but is the author’s interpretation from a wide reading of the literature. For sources that maintain unipolarity see: Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, 2023). For arguments of bipolarity, see Goldstein (2020) and Bekkevold and Tunsjø (2022). Kassab (2022) and Acharya (2023) assert a multipolarity shift.

Indo-Pacific economic security has suffered greatly amidst this strategic competition. The US-China trade war has disrupted global supply chains, inflated consumer prices, and damaged trust in multilateral institutions like the WTO—particularly for trade-dependent Indo-Pacific states (Evenett, 2022; WSJ, 2025; The Australian, 2025). This trend has left Indo-Pacific states more exposed to economic and humanitarian shocks. This economic vulnerability feeds into a broader sense of strategic uncertainty—undermining not just prosperity, but the institutional trust and cohesion on which allied deterrence relies.

The key security challenge for most countries in the world, [especially] middle powers such as Australia and small states like New Zealand, is the erosion of the rules based international order. Because rules are there for the weak, not for the strong.
Patman-PC, 2025

The fracturing of the rules-based order therefore weakens the deterrent value of the alliances that once embodied it. The US now frames alliances as transactional obligations tied to allied contributions rather than enduring strategic alignment (Blaxland-PC, 2025). Yet as Rose (2025) points out, its “true asymmetric advantage in its competition with China lies in its alliances and partnerships”. If partners infer that US security guarantees are contingent on presidential will rather than institutional resolve, the region’s deterrent posture is degraded—and rivals gain space to apply pressure in contested zones (Rose, 2025). That prospect elevates the strategic importance of how Australasian powers design and operationalise their alliances.

Global institutional uncertainty underlines the value of intra-regional resilience initiatives—such as a Trans-Tasman Security Council—to sustain alignment and signal resolve, and an Anzac Pacific Strategy to address local deficiencies in soft power and economic vulnerability.

Operational Implication

An Australasian View

For Australia and NZ’s immediate Indo-Pacific neighbourhood—the South-West Pacific—these trends translate into profound strategic vulnerability. They are highly reliant on seaborne trade and international maritime law. As Parker (PC-2025) notes, this dependence uniquely exposes South-West Pacific nations to sea lane disruptions and maritime coercion. Recent unannounced Chinese naval manoeuvres in the Tasman Sea, described by Olney (PC-2025) as “a muscle flex,” underscore the proximity of these risks.

The South-West Pacific, once treated as a strategic backwater, is now contested ground. As Parker (PC-2025) observes, “China being the dominant security power in the South-West Pacific allows China to ... lodge military capabilities in the Pacific and... be able to cut off Australia and NZ”. Steff (2024) asserts the notion of the “benign security environment [has been] cast in the dustbin of history”. Blaxland (PC-2025), drawing on Liang and Xiangsui (1999), terms this environment “unrestricted competition”: pervasive multi-domain strategic contestation below the threshold of conventional war, encompassing economic, political, legal, and technological statecraft. This conception details a state of “strategic saturation”, wherein failure to connect with partners on security matters on their terms will certainly see competitors fill that void.

As regional complexity rises, closer engagement with South-West Pacific neighbours becomes imperative. This requires cultivating an authentic, inclusive regional security framework that is sensitive to the perspectives of Australia, New Zealand, the Realm states, and other Pacific partners (Powles & Wallis, 2022). The weakening of global institutions and rising local contestation raise the premium on regionally tailored, politically legitimate, and operationally credible alliance mechanisms. The Solomon Islands experience is instructive: the Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands (RAMSI’s) operational successes did not substitute for sustained political and development engagement, demonstrating the limits of episodic intervention and the value of enduring, locally legitimate commitments (Allen & Dinnen, 2016).¹¹ The next section examines whether and how alliances—appropriately recalibrated—can furnish that resilience.

This view reinforces the need for an Anzac Joint Assessments Cell, along with Combined Command and Control Protocols that enable rapid collaboration whilst respecting sovereignty. An Anzac Pacific Strategy that prioritises Pacific agency is central to retaining coordinated and mutually reinforcing approaches to their close regional partners.

Operational Implication

¹¹ Covered in more detail at Annex B.

Section Two: Alliances as Strategic Instruments

This section examines alliances as instruments of statecraft and applies that analytic frame to the Australia–NZ relationship. It proceeds in three steps. First, it summarises core theoretical considerations to show why alliances matter and what trade-offs they entail. Second, it reconceptualises deterrence for the Indo-Pacific and shows how alliances shape credible deterrence. Finally, it applies these insights to the Anzac case: assessing complementarities, asymmetries, and the operational and institutional gaps that must be closed to translate political intent into coherent allied action.

Resilience through Alliances

Alliances are purposive instruments—academic theory describes how they structure expectations, pool capabilities and alter adversaries’ calculations. Classic realist theory explains alliance formation as an expression of balance-of-power logic—states bind with partners to aggregate power and deter aggression (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). Liberal institutionalists shift focus from structure to process, arguing that institutions lower transaction costs, reduce uncertainty, and facilitate cooperation even when interests diverge (Jervis, 1978; Keohane & Nye, 1977). Constructivists introduce a further distinction: they conceptualise alliances not simply as strategic arrangements, but as social institutions: norms, habits and common professional cultures sustain interoperability and trust (Wendt, 1999). Together these traditions show that alliances are not a single tool but a toolbox: comprising deterrent signalling, burden-sharing, information-sharing, normative projection, and capacity pooling (Jervis, 1978; Risse-Kappen, 1995).

Alliances carry trade-offs. Entanglement (or entrapment)—being drawn into a partner’s war—and abandonment—having commitments withheld when most needed—remain perennial fears (Snyder, 1997; Gyngell, 2017). Alliances can rigidify policy, reduce diplomatic manoeuvrability, and provoke rivals if they are perceived as exclusionary blocs (Schweller, 2006). Strating (2023) warns of a form of “rhetorical entrapment” where states box themselves in through narratives they construct around alliance commitments. Scholars have at times characterised alliances as “transmission belts for war” (Ravenal, 1980); dangerous commitments which ensnare larger powers (Posen, 2013). Yet Beckley (2015), through broad empirical analysis, contests this. He argues that US-led alliances have largely deterred aggression and preserved stability, with states managing obligations carefully to preserve collective benefits while limiting political liabilities, therein reframing alliances as net-beneficial. For small and middle powers, these dynamics create a delicate calculus: alliance participation offers capacity and security amplification, but may also constrain foreign policy independence and expose states to strategic risk. Managing alliance trade-offs requires attention to the institutional forms they take.

A theoretically informed AJOC is critical; a trans-Tasman Strategic Policy Centre would cement this.

Operational Implication

Forms of Cooperation

Alliances operate within a broad institutional ecosystem. Multilateral fora (ASEAN, the UN) bring legitimacy, norms, and wide-based problem solving but often produce lowest-common-denominator outcomes and slow decision cycles. Minilaterals (the Quad, AUKUS) and bilateral ties can be more agile and clearer about burden-sharing and roles but risk appearing exclusionary and accelerating strategic polarisation if not carefully framed (Bisley, 2024; Tzinieris, 2023). The choice is therefore not binary: a layered architecture—multilateral engagement for legitimacy and norm maintenance, complemented by selective unilateral and bilateral arrangements for responsiveness—better reconciles these trade-offs.

Alliances do not supplant collective security. This paper uses *collective security* to mean universal institutional schemes (the UN Charter model) and *collective defence* to mean pooled defence arrangements among a subset of states. Treating alliances as collective-defence instruments—rather than substitutes for collective security—highlights two practical implications. First, alliances are pragmatic tools that operate within and alongside multilateral norms, not replacements for them. Second, their operational and signalling requirements differ: whereas collective security institutions depend primarily on universal engagement and legal frameworks (Keohane & Nye, 1977), alliances require explicit burden-sharing rules, shared operating models, and clear expectations (Walt, 1987). They can exist without these features in less formal arrangements, but that has trade-offs.

Informal partnerships can complement formal treaties but are double-edged. As Blaxland (PC-2025) puts it, interoperability is often “between the ears”: durable cooperation rests on shared expectations, habituated practice, and close working relationships. Cooperative programmes—regular exercises, shared logistics, training pipelines and intelligence links—can produce meaningful deterrent effects without the political cost of binding treaties (MFAT Official-PC, 2025; Fontaine, 2016; Walt, 1997). Yet critics caution that “while the distinctions between allies and partners may blur during peacetime, they can become acute amid a crisis” (Gomez et al., 2025). Flexibility may reduce political entanglement, but it can also create ambiguity about obligations when they matter most. The policy choice therefore involves trading clarity for flexibility—or deliberately designing mechanisms that preserve both.

All forms of cooperation should be evaluated by how they shape the Indo-Pacific’s contemporary threats. Whilst collective security remains foundational to international stability, Australia and NZ require a durable and effective alliance to respond to the challenges of deteriorating regional security. Although formal alliances offer burden-sharing and operational clarity, they risk undermining legitimacy if perceived as exclusionary. A layered architecture—flexible, inclusive, and norm-sensitive—best reconciles the imperatives of strategic responsiveness and regional trust. The practical yardstick for any trans-Tasman arrangement is whether it is visible, credible, and politically sustainable across a spectrum of contingencies. Competition, coercion, and climate vulnerability increasingly play out below the threshold of conventional war (Emmott, 2024; Steff, 2025). The next section explores a reconception of deterrence to address this change for the Anzac setting.

A layered regional architecture is needed: linked NSS/NDS and targeted bilateral deterrence via Aligned Campaign Orchestration and an Anzac Pacific Strategy.

Operational Implication

The Geometry of Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific

Deterrence isn't only military—it requires diplomatic, economic, and normative instruments under an 'all-tools' approach to statecraft.

MFAT Official-PC, 2025

Deterrence is inherently defensive and anticipatory. It seeks to prevent undesired actions by credibly threatening unacceptable costs. As a form of coercion, it differs from compellence—seeking to change behaviour already in motion—as deterrence preserves initiative (Schelling, 1966). With de-escalation proving elusive in modern conflicts, deterrence is paramount. The following explores how deterrence must evolve for the challenges facing the Indo-Pacific, which will determine the priorities of a more integrated Australia-NZ alliance.

Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific must be reconceived as geometric rather than linear.

Traditional hub-and-spokes deterrence is inadequate given the depth and complexity of regional challenges. Classical models, such as Jervis's (1978) argument that the “security dilemma is ameliorated when the defence has the advantage over the offence”, assumed clear adversaries, observable capabilities, and identifiable escalation pathways. Contemporary dynamics obscure all three¹² (Santoro & Glosserman, 2024). A web-like deterrence geometry is now required—one that preserves tailored bilateral assurances while empowering multilateral resolve. For NZ and Australia, this implies a geometry combining *distributed denial*, *inclusive institutional ballast*, and *interlinked economic and security arrangements*.

Distributed denial. The deliberate dispersion of military assets across regional forward positions raises the operational costs of aggression and complicates adversary planning. Australia's “strategy of denial” aims to present a resilient, distributed, capable posture; NZ's emphasis on legitimacy, and adaptable, forward deployed forces reinforces this approach (DoD, 2024; GONZ, 2023). Together, they offer a complementary model. However, Kuper (2024) warns that denial without presence risks creating exploitable gaps. Deterrence requires not just material posture, but visible, habitual cooperation to make it credible (Blaxland-PC, 2025).

[NZ] has a world view that's very different from [our partners], and partly because our founding document was based on cooperation and partnership... That Treaty shapes our world view... we want to see a world based on rules, principles, and partnership, and we like multilateralism.

Patman-PC, 2025

Inclusive institutional ballast. Political legitimacy remains central: a dense web of diplomatic ties and multilateral commitments raises the political cost of coercion by generating unified responses (Kapur, 2024). If coercive actions provoke regional solidarity, they become counterproductive. NZ could have a distinctive contribution here: its experience with *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* principles, which emphasise equitable partnership, could offer a model for engaging Pacific partners in inclusive, values-based security frameworks (Greener, 2024; Patman-PC, 2025). Credible deterrence must reflect the values and threat perceptions of all stakeholders—not just major powers.

¹² For discussion of how great-power competition extends beyond conventional military confrontation and how that changes the nature of modern deterrence—see Santoro & Glosserman (2024).

Our notion of national security is changing in an increasingly interconnected world. We can't divorce economic arrangements from security arrangements, and we also can't divorce problems which don't respect borders from our sovereign security arrangements.

Patman-PC, 2025

Interlinked economic and security arrangements.

In the Indo-Pacific, trade, infrastructure, and supply chains are deeply enmeshed in geopolitical strategy. Though economic-security entanglement can raise fears of entrapment, it can also reinforce deterrence by elevating the political and material cost of coercion (Beckley, 2015; Patman-PC, 2025). For instance, the recent Australia-Papua New

Guinea Pukpuk Treaty not only commits to enhanced defence cooperation but includes socio-economic dimensions such as job-creating recruitment pathways and infrastructure investment, which demonstrates how security-economic entanglement can bolster both capability and legitimacy (Albanese & Marape, 2025). Such strategies must be regionally attuned: if security frameworks appear exclusionary or ideologically rigid, they may erode trust and legitimacy (Ikenberry, 2011).

This geometry is not risk-free. Close alliances risk provocation if miscalibrated (Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1987), but well-designed arrangements can strengthen deterrence and reduce the risk of conflict (Beckley, 2015; Patman-PC, 2025). For Australia and NZ, the challenge is to maintain flexibility and transparency—a “less complacent, clearer-eyed understanding of strategic divergence” (Taylor, 2024). Ensuring increasingly integrated operational activities are matched with diplomatic engagement to preserve regional trust will empower their alliance.

Translating this “geometry of deterrence” from theory into practice requires examining how middle powers operationalise it within existing alliance frameworks. For Australia and New Zealand, the Anzac relationship represents both a legacy institution and a forward-looking laboratory for alliance adaptation in the Indo-Pacific. The following section traces how this alliance has evolved, where it now faces strain, and how its renewal could anchor the regional deterrence web envisioned above.

Translate deterrence geometry into practice through Aligned Campaign Orchestration, an Operational Capability Index, regular joint exercises, and tested Command and Control Protocols to make deterrence through distributed denial visible and credible.

Operational Implication

The Anzac Case

The closer the relationship, the better for our security—but that comes with tensions around sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

Capie-PC, 2025

If deterrence geometry requires deep and credible partnership, the Australia-NZ alliance offers both precedent and potential. From co-deployment in the Second Anglo-Boer War to formal enshrinement in the Canberra Pact (1944) and the ANZUS Treaty (1951), the bilateral relationship has evolved to meet changing strategic needs (Stowers, 2002). While the suspension of NZ-US security cooperation in the 1980s muted part of the ANZUS triangle, NZ and Australia have maintained uninterrupted defence and intelligence integration. The Closer Economic and Defence Relations agreements and extensive diasporic connections further embed high cultural and policy permeability. This section explores this foundation—focussing on areas of divergence, then opportunities to adapt the alliance to evolving deterrence needs.

Strategic Divergence and Asymmetry

Despite emphatic rhetorical support, the Australia-NZ alliance suffers from complacency.

The neighbours are deeply integrated, highly aligned in values¹³, and linked through shared exercises, intelligence, and consistent crisis cooperation (Ayson, 2023; DoD Official-PC, 2025). Their Prime Ministers describe the nations as “friends, family, and formal allies” (DFAT, 2024). Yet their alliance also faces challenges: it has become so taken for granted that analysts warn it needs active review facing a swiftly changing Indo-Pacific (Taylor, 2024; Wallis & Powles, 2024).

There’s nothing more certain than the bedrock of the relationship that we have between our two great countries.
Luxon, 2025

Walt (1997) vividly warned that failure to do so may see an alliance “dead long before anyone notices, and the discovery of the corpse may come at a very inconvenient moment” (p. 167). The rapidly changing security environment renders “habitual closeness”¹⁴ insufficient as a strategic basis; it masks divergence.

Australia and NZ have developed distinct strategic orientations. Geography partly explains this: while both are secure in their latitudes, their northern outlooks diverge. Wellington’s focus on the Pacific foregrounds an inherently different threat perception to that of a large continental mass adjacent to the diversity and political complexity of South-East Asia (Köllner, 2022). Cultural demographics and immigration trends contribute to what Olney (PC-2025) observes as NZ being “seen as a Pacific nation—Australia as an Indo-Pacific nation”. Wellington’s commitments to an independent foreign policy (notably its nuclear-free stance) have produced measured caution toward certain high-end security arrangements (Steff, 2025). Australia, by contrast, has traditionally relied heavily on its US alliance; AUKUS deepens that tendency (DoD Official-PC, 2025; White, 2019). Recognising these differences helps to avoid developing seams for adversaries to exploit. Clear mutual expectations in national strategies are essential while both countries adjust posture to new deterrence demands.

¹³ Although not totally: differing US relationships, Pacific approaches, and 2003 Iraq War stances stand out. For more on these historical cleavages and their consequences see McKinnon (1993), Taylor (2024).

¹⁴ See Hopf (2010). For additional background see Wallis & Powles (2024).

The rapid reorientation of defence strategy alignment has not been balanced. Whilst NZ increasingly places Australia central to its security calculus, Australian strategy lists NZ only as a “partner”, reserving “ally” for the United States (DoD, 2023; MoD, 2025; Powles & Wallis, 2024).

Greater public reference to NZ cooperation under ANZUS in Australian [strategy] would reinforce our credibility domestically and abroad.
MFAT Official-PC, 2025

NZ’s DCP (2025) proposes a “force multiplier” role within a modernised Anzac Force, with over 70% of major investments linked to Australia’s Integrated Investment Program (IIP) (DoD, 2024; MoD, 2025). Critics suggest this risks NZ’s military strategy becoming “subordinate to Australia’s — and by extension that of Australia’s ‘closest ally and principal strategic partner,’ the United States” (Hume, 2025). This perception is reinforced when the public-facing IIP omits NZ entirely, whilst the DCP refers to Australia 33 times. NZ is increasingly tethered to Australian defence strategy and procurement, but the alliance logic underpinning this remains underdeveloped.

NZ will not operate on its own, end of story. Therefore, by default, interoperability is critical to what NZ does.
Olney-PC, 2025

The relationship carries asymmetric weighting, meaning strategically more to NZ than to Australia (Olney-PC, 2025, Parker-PC, 2025; Taylor, 2024). Parker (PC-2025) characterised the asymmetry as lopsided, but not one-sided: “Australia needs NZ in the Pacific, but... for NZ to be able to protect its national security interests [it] needs to slot

into [Australia’s] bigger military capability”. Asymmetry raises inherent challenges: senior partners manage burden-sharing concerns as net benefactors, while junior partners guard strategic autonomy (O’Neil, 2017). Australian defence spending—which in 2024 reached US\$35.9 billion—dwarfs NZ’s at US\$3.9 billion, shaping procurement and modernisation pace (IISS, 2024). NZ aims to redress some of this imbalance through a NZ\$12bn capability investment plan (MoD, 2025). Managing this asymmetry requires early, candid, and continuous dialogue on strategy, procurement, and force design (MFAT Official-PC, 2025; Olney-PC, 2025).

Divergence and asymmetry increase the urgency to modernise the alliance. As Taylor (2025) argues that Australia balances its US alliance with sovereign decision-making, NZ too can maintain agency in the trans-Tasman relationship. Strategic autonomy within the alliance is mutually beneficial but requires robust and adaptive mechanisms. Recent Chinese naval activity in the Tasman Sea signalled emerging strategic interdependence—requiring immediate, coordinated responses (Andrews & Khoo, 2025). Failure to modernise would risk reactive, disjointed responses precisely when coordination is most needed.

Opportunities to Increase Integration

NZ’s focus is on the Pacific; when [Australia] do things in the Pacific, it goes much better when we do it hand in glove with NZ.

Blaxland-PC, 2025

Coordinated integration has advantages, but preserving sovereignty is paramount. Australia-NZ cooperation can make the whole greater than the sum of its parts (DoD/MoD, 2024). Australia’s operational capacity and NZ’s Pacific position are mutually reinforcing. More than half of the interviewed experts highlighted defensive depth—the

stable geographic space to manoeuvre—as a shared benefit, whilst touting NZ’s relational capital in the Pacific as vital leverage for Australia’s regional efforts (DoD Official-PC, 2025; Capie-PC, 2025; Parker-PC, 2025). However, several were cautious, with Capie (PC-2025) observing, “integration sounds good, but what [does it] mean for choice, for sovereignty?” Enshrining sovereign interests in clear national strategies would guide defence integration.

Defence integration faces inertia at the middle level. Tactical interoperability remains strong, underpinned by common platforms, procedures, and equipment (Australian DoD, 2024). Yet between political direction and tactical execution lies what experts describe as the “frozen middle” (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996)—a zone of organisational inertia that resists change and curtails initiative (DFAT Official-PC, 2025; MFAT Official-PC, 2025). A MFAT Official (PC-2025) described it as “the bit that's hard to get at”, whereas strong strategic and tactical interoperability is well established, “shifting approaches... in that middle, it's quite hard”. This gap is most consequential in the operational warfighting realm, which ultimately shapes the effectiveness and coherence of coalition operations, especially in conflict (DoD Official-PC, 2025). The result is an alliance driven by top-down rhetoric and bottom-up familiarity, without the deep connective tissue of integrated campaign planning, connected command and control, and joint procurement logic. These are essential to achieve the MoD/DoD (2024) Joint Statement intent for an integrated “Anzac Force” to be a stabilising regional influence.

A changing order elevates regional solutions to regional problems.

Retrenched ideational leadership, fragmenting international forums, and coercive external influence should galvanise Indo-Pacific independence. In this context, Keating’s (1996) call to seek “security in Asia, not from Asia” takes on renewed relevance. Australia and NZ are better positioned to lead positive regional security change together than apart. Doing so is contingent on effective stewardship of inclusive institutions that understand and incorporate broad regional conceptions of security. Over half of the interviewed experts raised regional partner perspectives as an important or essential element of any regional security endeavour, something both Australia and NZ have not always got right (Powles & Wallis, 2022). A revitalised Anzac alliance—carefully curated to emphasise strengths, manage divergence, and incorporate diverse perspectives—could prove a stabilising anchor in the Indo-Pacific deterrence geometry, and both nations are vocal about pursuing this.

Multilateral cooperation doesn't have to be top-down... there is scope in the current [global] environment for middle powers and small powers to play a much greater role. And it could start in this region.

Patman-PC, 2025

Despite rhetorical reinvigoration of the alliance, intellectual and institutional momentum is low. There is no standing Australia–NZ ministerial council; coordination depends on periodic meetings and subordinate working groups. Institutional depth is limited without a trans-Tasman policy centre akin to Australia’s US-focused institutes (Taylor, 2024). Analysts note a “dearth of scholars writing about the alliance in Australia,” with few in Canberra’s strategic community studying NZ (Wallis & Powles, 2024). This intellectual gap has policy consequences; public discourse is muted, and the partnership is often taken for granted (Wallis & Powles, 2024). This risks subtle divergences—on China, climate, or regional policy—drifting unchecked. Correcting this requires robust institutional mechanisms—not just rhetoric—to translate vision into capability. Robust institutions provide a buffer for bilateral tension; especially important during periods of significant change or reorientation.

If you want to support the rules-based order, it's not effortless. It involves more than words. We have to do our share of heavy lifting when the rules-based order is challenged by rogue actors or authoritarian states.

Patman-PC, 2025

Australia's strategic posture is undergoing a deliberate recalibration towards warfighting¹⁵—NZ must understand this change early. Interpreting how this change affects the alliance will highlight opportunities to leverage Australian investments and forecast convergence and divergence. The long-standing “balanced force” model, configured to meet a wide spectrum of contingencies, is giving way

to a concentrated “focussed force” designed to address the region’s principal military challenges (DoD Official-PC, 2025; Taylor, 2024). This evolution emphasises investments in long-range strike capabilities, advanced maritime platforms and a nuclear-powered submarine programme (Parker-PC, 2025). It narrows the force’s task set, privileging state-level deterrence over expeditionary versatility (Taylor, 2024). Integrated strategic assessments and bilateral procurement groups will help NZ remain engaged with this doctrinal evolution and preserve coherence between their defence establishments.

Alliance theory suggests that well-designed partnerships increase deterrence and resilience, but only when institutionalised in routine practice. For the Anzac relationship this requires embedded arrangements that codify joint strategies, bridge the frozen middle, and sustain political and intellectual stewardship. Alliance resilience in the Indo-Pacific will rest less on declaratory alignment than on institutionalised practices capable of operationalising shared deterrence logics. For the Anzac alliance, this demands deliberate recalibration: converting complementarity into coherence without sacrificing sovereign agency. The Anzac Joint Operating Concept and supporting reforms proposed in Section Three are thus designed to enhance this integration amidst an era of strategic turbulence.

The erosion of an international rules-based order—crucial for safeguarding New Zealand's interests and values in the world—underlines the importance of bolstering Trans-Tasman security ties

Patman-PC, 2025

Anchor the AJOC politically via linked NSS/NDS and a standing Trans-Tasman Security Council, and intellectually via a Trans-Tasman Strategic Policy Centre to sustain stewardship and legitimacy. Formalise habitual cooperation through Joint Capability Procurement and Training. Target the frozen middle with focused instruments: define Combined Strategic Effects, operationalise them in Aligned Campaign Orchestration, and codify Digital and Technical Interoperability Standards to enshrine common understanding.

Operational Implication

¹⁵ Part of Australia’s “All Tools” focussed force reorientation expanded in their National Defence Strategy 2024. The AUKUS initiative highlights this: Australia moved quickly to join the trilateral deterrence pact, whereas New Zealand’s reaction has been reserved (Sinclair, 2025; Steff, 2024).

Section Three: Pathways to Bridge the Ditch

This final section shifts from diagnosis to prescription, identifying opportunities to build the alliance required for a more contested region. It outlines three interlocking recommendations to operationalise a stronger trans-Tasman alliance. At their centre is the Anzac Joint Operating Concept (AJOC): a shared framework guiding how Australia and New Zealand prepare, respond, and operate as a cohesive coalition across the security spectrum. Two supporting recommendations reinforce strategic, political, and institutional alignment, offering practical steps to deepen alliance resilience and readiness. Grounded in recent bilateral commitments, capability plans, and expert input, their shared aim is to institutionalise trust and translate alignment into action.

1. Operationalise the Alliance - an Anzac Joint Operating Concept

To convert strategic intent into coherent and enduring practice, Australia and NZ should jointly develop an Anzac Joint Operating Concept (AJOC). The AJOC is a broad, whole-of-alliance framework: a living dashboard for prescribing, visualising, and tracking how the two countries cooperate across defence, intelligence, and security. It is not merely an operational tool, but a nucleus for political resolve and strategic imagination. It should be codeveloped with the trans-Tasman Roadmap to 2035 and other key initiatives.¹⁶

There needs to be a formal level of agreement about that [integration]... that ensures both countries' sovereign equities are protected... an interoperability matrix... a dashboard that looks at... key platforms and tasks.

Parker-PC, 2025

Like a computer's operating system, the AJOC would provide a shared platform to plug in different tools—capabilities, plans, forces—and run them in sync. It would be akin to NATO's successful STANAG framework,¹⁷ but leaner and more agile. This central repository could capture common approaches and purpose as new facets of interoperability emerge, such as artificial intelligence.

Rather than create new bureaucratic structures, it will ensure existing ones can “boot up” together quickly, coherently, and with pre-agreed intent.

The AJOC should function as both a compass and a dashboard—setting direction and providing real-time visibility of trans-Tasman cooperation across security domains. Its value lies in codifying linkages that span strategic effects, operational coordination, interoperability, and institutional development. Crucially, the AJOC should be sponsored at the ANZMIN level, driven by the Group of Four, but have a devolved action-oriented decision architecture around specific pillars and initiatives. This ensures sustained civilian–military oversight whilst seeking to break through the “frozen middle”.

¹⁶ The trans-Tasman Roadmap to 2035 outlines Australia/NZ's shared vision for a secure, sustainable, and inclusive region, around five themes (MFAT, 2023). The AJOC should incorporate existing efforts under three of the five themes and (contribute to the other two), being: Security and Resilience; Active Partners in the Pacific; and Upholding Shared Principles and Values.

¹⁷ The NATO Standardisation Agreement (STANAG) system provides a formal mechanism through which the 32 alliance members harmonise equipment specifications, procedures, and terminology to ensure interoperability. It is widely credited as a key enabler of NATO's operational effectiveness and multinational cohesion. As the NATO Standardization Office notes, “standardisation is one of NATO's fundamental principles, enabling forces from different nations to operate together effectively and efficiently.” (NATO, 2023) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_124879

Structurally, the AJOC comprises a set of pillars with accompanying implementation mechanisms. These will evolve but should include the following groupings. Three are expanded upon as priority action areas based on this research.

➤ *Define Combined Strategic Effects*

Drawing on national security and defence strategy, the AJOC should centre on clearly articulated shared strategic effects, to calibrate the security apparatus.

➤ *Collaborate on Aligned Campaign Orchestration*

Pre-agreed roles and responsibilities both in linked theatre campaign plans, and in various regional contingency plans. This allows for deep and detailed connection in classified campaign sequencing, and bolstered coordination in public-facing areas like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief—building public engagement and trust in line with principles in the NZ NSS.

➤ *Develop an Operational Capability Index*

Articulating key coalition capabilities and outputs (e.g. major platform capabilities, access and basing restrictions, rules of engagement), to guide both military and political planners in responsive planning scenarios that are “off the playbook”.

➤ *Coordinate Digital and Technical Interoperability Standards*

Digital connectivity defines common situation awareness. Establish core joint systems, software, and workstreams to support this connectivity.¹⁸ With connected systems, interoperability can be expanded and codified into enduring logistics and planning arrangements as they evolve.

➤ *Set Combined Command and Control Protocols*

Agreed thresholds and mechanisms for bilateral force coordination are required, especially under compressed timelines. This is a critical enabler to a coherent alliance. Command and control capabilities are asymmetric; mechanisms for rapid integration must be planned, agreed and exercised in peacetime to preserve sovereign equities while enabling timely coalition action. Without stronger coordination at the operational level—particularly in coalition warfighting and campaign planning—the political ambition of an Anzac Force will remain aspirational, not operational.

➤ *Align Capability Procurement and Training*

Without aligning capability and training with Australia, [NZ] will find it difficult to grow capability at a reasonable cost or timeframe.

Parker (in O'Dwyer), 2025

For the AJOC to function beyond theory, it must rest on interoperable capabilities that are coherent by design.

Australia and NZ's procurement and training collaboration is piecemeal. Shared ambitions—such as acting as “force multipliers”—can be undermined by mismatched platforms, incompatible procedures, or divergent sustainment models. NZ cannot match pace with Australian investment; ingenuity and efficiency will be essential in capability collaboration.

¹⁸ Focus areas include common theatre campaign sequencing tools, integrated comms systems, and joint air tasking order production, but a coherent suite would need to be defined.

To address this, the two governments should incorporate Joint Capability Working Groups within the AJOC. These groups would leverage existing arrangements to:

- ❖ **Collaboratively roadmap acquisition timelines**, investigating co-acquisition opportunities and engaging with regional defence industry;
- ❖ **Share in-service support contracts and training pipelines**, leveraging existing platform ecosystems and building a shared cadre of trained personnel; and,
- ❖ **Develop joint capability lifecycle models**, ensuring continuity and minimising overlap, especially in niche areas like Antarctic logistics or Pacific patrol vessels.

These measures will reduce redundancy, improve readiness, and directly support the AJOC’s campaign planning functions—enabling forces to deploy as a coherent whole rather than as parallel elements. Guided by joint force design principles and niche complementarity, both nations can move from interoperability in principle to interdependence in practice.

➤ *Strengthen Joint Assessment Integration*

The next step is to transform parallel awareness into shared foresight. Australia and NZ already share intelligence extensively—particularly under Five Eyes. Strategic alignment is often undermined not by a lack of data, but by the absence of joint interpretation, anticipatory analysis, and policy calibration.

Dial us in early to your thinking on things; instead of that being... “how are you seeing threat X” or “what are you doing about the demise of the multilateral system”, that [it] would be... automatic.

MFAT Official-PC, 2025

To improve this:

- ❖ **Establish an Anzac Joint Assessment Cell**, by collocating or virtually embedding liaisons within each other’s strategic policy and intelligence coordination divisions to produce joint assessments on key regional risks and potential triggers.¹⁹
- ❖ **Define shared thresholds and embed them in AJOC.** Agree on parameters—such as coercive maritime events, destabilisation in Pacific states, or non-kinetic warfare—that would activate bilateral consultation. Define strategic posture adjustments in the AJOC.
- ❖ **Test policy coherence**, by running regular trans-Tasman planning and command-post exercises focused on grey-zone risks and rapid escalation. These activities should involve a broad range of agency officials to ensure whole-of-government alignment.

Shared interpretation and rehearsed responses will better position Australia and NZ to act decisively in moments of uncertainty. Enhanced joint assessments will also lend greater credibility and consistency to their regional engagements.

¹⁹ A bilateral forum for military and civilian intelligence agencies, foreign affairs, and others.

➤ *Publish an Anzac Pacific Strategy*

The AJOC should provide a medium for articulating and monitoring the broad activities Australia and NZ undertake in Pacific diplomacy, development, and security engagement.

The two nations already collaborate in myriad areas – the challenge is in weaving this efforts into a coherent tapestry. Without close coordination, they risk duplication, diluted influence, and missed opportunities to support Pacific priorities.

This doesn't mean surrendering agency – each nation will maintain their own agenda.

However, for the vast areas of regional policy overlap, there is significant advantage in Australia and NZ knowing what each other are doing. By understanding their respective strengths they could leverage better results and identify vulnerabilities and threats earlier. A centralised repository for Pacific strategy and shared interests will enhance policy coherence with Pacific partner perspectives—which have often been underemphasised (Powles & Wallis, 2022).

To this end, Australia and NZ should:

- ❖ **Publish a Joint Pacific Strategy under the AJOC**, articulating shared regional interests and principles consistent with Pacific perspectives laid out in the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* (PIF, 2018). This defines security broadly—encompassing human, environmental, and resource security alongside traditional defence concerns. The Strategy should be framed around Pacific priorities such as climate action and ocean stewardship, as reflected in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (PIF, 2022).
- ❖ **Expand commitments through existing mechanisms**, such as the Pacific Maritime Security Program, the Pacific Response Group, and PACER Plus, to respond more directly to Pacific concerns around security and development priorities.
- ❖ **Coordinate to address the regional soft power gap**, by articulating trans-Tasman development priorities to harmonise aid programs, avoid duplication, and improve visibility and impact, whilst being responsive to Pacific states' priorities.
- ❖ **Seek to grow Pacific-oriented dialogue on regional security** and geopolitical challenges, either through the PIF or dedicated and frequent track 1.5 engagements.

Alignment must not impede individuality. Section Two established that each country's distinct strategic personality is a strength. If coordination is considered and inclusive of Pacific perspectives, the resulting strategy can enhance both operational credibility and regional legitimacy. Then they may achieve what Powles (2025) prescribes: an “overarching Pacific strategy that coherently translates principles into practice” (p. 111). This strategy will be an important pillar of an adaptive AJOC.

Overall, the AJOC must be a dynamic blueprint: reviewed frequently, exercised in real-world settings, and updated as doctrine and threats evolve. Routine feedback loops should connect operational users with policy designers. However, **operational gaps will persist until national strategy catches up.**

2. Reform Strategic Policy Architecture: Linked Strategies

One of the weaknesses of both NZ and Australia’s recent Defence White Papers is that they try to determine military needs before considering the kind of wider strategic posture the military forces are intended to support... defence policy depends on judgements about the future of the international order, but it equally depends on the choices we make about the kind of role we want or expect our countries to play in that order.

White, 2010

A robust AJOC cannot function in a vacuum. It should be grounded in coherent, mutually reinforcing national strategies that provide political direction, bureaucratic mandate, and whole-of-government alignment. At present, however, Australia and NZ each operate from strategic documents that resemble chapters from different books—developed in isolation, often unreferenced, and lacking narrative coherence.

Both nations harbour major policy gaps. Australia should publish a National Security Strategy (NSS), answering repeated calls from scholars and practitioners (Ford, 2025; Medcalf, 2022; Ryan, 2024; Scott, 2022). Its absence leaves the new National Defence Strategy (NDS) “an orphan document in the national security enterprise” (Ryan, 2024), resulting in fragmented statecraft, especially amidst crises. Meanwhile, NZ has no standalone National Defence Strategy—its recent DCP (2025) provides useful acquisition intent peppered with strategic rhetoric, but lacks doctrinal clarity or effects-based mission guidance. Notably, it fails to reference NZ’s 2023 NSS—ostensibly its basis (Capie-PC, 2025). As one senior MFAT official (PC-2025) observed, NZ’s strategic posture risks being lost inside a capability shopping list.

Defining national interests that converge, or at least speak to one another, will create hooks for bilateral action. While each NSS/NDS serves sovereign interests, cross-referencing a part of these strategies offers an exceptional opportunity to articulate the modern Anzac alliance. The AJOC’s success will ultimately depend on whether each government can embed alliance coordination into their strategic outlook, not just their defence planning.

To address this, Australia and New Zealand should:

- ❖ **Publish an NSS and an NDS respectively**, that explicitly reference the Anzac alliance as a key regional security instrument; and,
- ❖ **Commit to a biennial joint strategic review**, to evaluate and refine these linkages in light of emerging threats, policy shifts, and regional dynamics.

A living reference in policy like the NSS would bridge informal rhetoric and formal obligations around our treaty
MFAT Official-PC, 2025

These reforms would elevate the alliance from a habitual partnership to a strategic fixture in each country’s worldview. Treating the AJOC as a tool of national strategy—not just bilateral coordination—lends it bureaucratic weight and political longevity.

Finally, clear and coordinated strategy send external signals. Amidst unrestricted strategic competition, declaratory alignment shows both allies and rivals that Australia and NZ are not improvising, but preparing. As Taylor (2025) argues, small and middle powers preserve strategic autonomy not by avoiding alignment, but by ensuring it reflects *clearly articulated* values and priorities. **These priorities should be robust products of political and academic institutions.**

3. Anchor the Alliance in Political and Academic Institutions

Even the most coherent strategies rely on connective tissue—institutions that sustain alignment, build relationships, and renew ideas. Without them, even the best-designed alliance risks drifting over time. If strategy is the architecture and operations are the machinery, then institutions are the maintenance crews. Without them, plans fall into disrepair, and momentum stalls.

To embed the AJOC as a “living” framework, it must be anchored in both *political stewardship* and *intellectual depth*. These functions are currently underdeveloped in the trans-Tasman alliance and must be deliberately constructed.

A. Political Stewardship: A Standing Trans-Tasman Security Council

The ANZMIN format (defence and foreign ministers) is the high-level consultation mechanism and is evolving, but its episodic nature limits continuity and collaboration in reactive settings. A permanent **Trans-Tasman Security Council**—an evolution of ANZMIN—could:

- ❖ **Steer AJOC progress** and ensure it remains aligned with shifting political priorities;
- ❖ **Signal deep bilateral resolve** commensurate with the nation’s relationship and shared commitment to regional security;
- ❖ **Convene in response to regional or global shocks** to align strategic posture; and,
- ❖ **Provide ongoing top-down accountability** for capability integration and regional engagement.

The current “meeting calendar approach” functions well as a consultative mechanism, but it does not amount to a permanent platform for joint decision-making under pressure.

The policy gaps will become apparent when the stressors close in.

Olney-PC, 2025

Institutionalising a standing council would cement shared strategic direction and provide a stable foundation for sustained political coordination—deepening trust beyond personalities or election cycles. Strategic flexibility is a key strength of the alliance; increased bureaucratic structure would need to preserve that strength (Olney-PC, 2025). Crucially, this council would also serve as the apex feedback mechanism for the AJOC: testing its relevance against evolving political priorities, ensuring accountability for implementation, and directing adjustments in response to real-world strategic changes.

B. Intellectual Depth: A Trans-Tasman Strategic Policy Centre

In parallel, a dedicated Strategic Policy Centre should act as the cognitive engine of the alliance. This research hub, based in institutions either side of the Tasman, would work to connect officials, scholars, and civil society.

This centre would:

- ❖ **Conduct rigorous, non-partisan analysis** of AJOC work streams;
- ❖ **Train future policymakers and officers** through joint fellowships, policy workshops, and graduate programs;
- ❖ **Engage civil society** to ensure transparent, informed debate on alliance issues; and,
- ❖ **Support AJOC development** through wargaming, red-teaming, and scenario planning.

By bridging official policy and independent research, this centre would deepen intellectual connectivity across the Tasman—enabling informed decisions and coherent world views.

The underlying logic of this program could be similar to that of the United States Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney—shaping policy, debate and ideas by deepening understanding of and strengthening Australia’s relationship with New Zealand, and vice versa.

Taylor, 2024

Together, these two institutions ensure that the AJOC remains a living framework—not a one-off policy artefact. The Security Council provides sustained political direction; the Strategic Policy Centre supports adaptation through research, education, and public engagement. **An alliance without active institutions risks being a treaty written in sand—clear today, but easily lost to the tide.**



↑ NZDF Joint Task Force
on the deck of HMNZS
Canterbury while supporting
Solomon Island Elections, 2024

Conclusion

This report examined the evolving utility of the Australia–NZ alliance amid intensifying regional challenges. It assessed the strategic rationale and operational feasibility of a more integrated bilateral relationship. Drawing on practitioner insight and contemporary scholarship, the analysis identifies both the potential and limitations of the alliance as a source of regional resilience.

The Indo-Pacific now faces a convergence of stressors that are reshaping the conditions in which alliances must operate. Great power rivalry is intensifying, regional institutions are under strain, climate change is a growing risk multiplier, and the rules-based order is fracturing. In this context, the Australia–NZ alliance can no longer rely on legacy arrangements. This research shows that a more integrated alliance would serve both national interests and regional stability.

Although a potential source of regional resilience, the Australia–NZ alliance remains underdeveloped as a strategic instrument. This report finds that perceived and practical closeness has masked important points of divergence and implementation challenges. Fragmented strategy, a “frozen middle” between political direction and tactical practice, shallow joint analysis, and uneven alignment with regional partner priorities impede alliance adaptation. These gaps now pose structural risks for each nation, and the regional order they seek to support.

To address these gaps, this report proposes three interlocking reforms, anchored by the Anzac Joint Operating Concept (AJOC). Far more than a doctrinal framework, the AJOC is conceived as both a compass and a dashboard—setting direction and providing real-time visibility across trans-Tasman security cooperation. It is charged with aligning capabilities, steering joint initiatives, and translating political intent into practical interoperability. Surrounding this centrepiece are reforms to strategic policy architecture and institutional foundations, each complementing existing momentum. These novel practical solutions are based on an evidence-rich case study of the trans-Tasman alliance.

This report contributes to alliance scholarship by offering a practitioner-oriented assessment of the case for deeper Australia–NZ integration. It bridges alliance theory and practice by positioning institutional design and strategic policy architecture—not just military interoperability—as critical determinants in alliance resilience. Trade-offs and risks are acknowledged: deeper coordination may provoke strategic competition, heighten sovereignty concerns, or misalign with regional expectations. While this report identifies viable pathways for integration, further research is needed to assess political feasibility, legal implications, and—critically—regional partner perceptions.

The trans-Tasman alliance stands at a moment of opportunity. Implemented with rigour, transparency, and respect for regional values, the AJOC and its supporting reforms can help it evolve into a practical bulwark for regional stability amidst a deteriorating security outlook. The choice is clear: institutionalise cooperation now, or improvise when it matters most.

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Appendix A — AJOC Derivation Mapping Table

This annex maps each major element of the proposed Anzac Joint Operating Concept (AJOC) to the specific evidence, interview/literature support, broader theoretical rationale, and suggested near-term indicators and actions. It is intended as a draft implementation-oriented traceability annex for policymakers.

| AJOC component | Supporting evidence in thesis (sections and documentary references) | Interview / literature support | Expanded theoretical rationale (selected scholars and concepts) | Suggested near-term indicator / action (actionable) |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| <p>Combined Strategic Effects — shared objectives to align planning and posture</p> | <p>Evidence of strategic divergence and the need for explicit shared effects appears in Section Two (Strategic Divergence and asymmetry) and in analysis of national strategies and doctrine across Sections One and Two (references to NZ DCP 2025; Australian DoD NDS/IID materials cited in thesis).</p> | <p>Interview references in the text: Parker (2025) on asymmetry; Australian DoD Official (2025) and NZ MFAT/DoD officials noting need for clearer roles. Literature cited in thesis and relevant outside sources: Walt (1987) on alliance purposes; Beckley (2015) on alliance benefits for small powers; Keohane & Nye on institutional coordination.</p> | <p>Realist: clarity of ends reduces risk of entrapment/ abandonment (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). Institutionalist: shared objectives lower transaction costs and support sustained cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Jervis, 1978). Alliance management: explicit strategic effects facilitate burden-sharing and credible signalling (Snyder, 1997; Beckley, 2015).</p> | <p>Produce a one-page Combined Strategic Effects statement for ANZMIN endorsement; indicator: formal ministerial endorsement and distribution to operational planners; action: embed strategic effects into exercise objectives for the next bilateral exercise cycle.</p> |

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| <p>Cohesive Campaigns — pre-agreed roles and campaign phasing for contingencies</p> | <p>Thesis discussion of operational planning gaps and the "frozen middle" appears in Section Two (Gaps & Risks) and the Findings where interviewees describe operational friction.</p> | <p>Interviews: NZ Defence Official (2025) and NZ MFAT Official (2025) describing planning gaps; Australian DFAT/DoD officials citing need for joint planning. Complementary program documents cited in the thesis (e.g. Joint Statements, ANZMIN minutes) strengthen documentary support.</p> | <p>Operational art & campaign theory: campaign phasing and clarity of roles reduce friction in coalition operations (Schelling on coercion; classic campaign planning literature). Deterrence geometry: coherent campaign options make deterrence credible across multiple contingencies (Santoro & Glosserman, 2024).</p> | <p>Draft campaign-phase templates (competition → crisis → conflict → stabilisation). Indicator: completion and ministerial sign-off of a joint campaign-template and a tabletop exercise testing it within 6–12 months.</p> |
| <p>Operational Capabilities Index — catalogue of joint capabilities, outputs, and constraints</p> | <p>The thesis documents capability asymmetry and procurement friction in Section Two (divergence and asymmetry) with IISS (2024) figures cited and DCP/IID references.</p> | <p>Interview/literature support: IISS (2024) defence-spend figures; NZ MoD (DCP 2025); Australian DoD procurement materials; comments from NZ MFAT Official (2025) and Australian DoD Official (PC-2025) on sustainment and platform lifecycles.</p> | <p>Capability transparency: mapping capabilities to effects follows institutionalist prescriptions for matching means to ends (Keohane; doctrinal literature). Force design: an effects-based catalogue supports design trade-offs and coalition planning</p> | <p>Build a living index (sharepoint) of platforms, sustainment limits, basing/access constraints and readiness Indicator: shared index used in one joint planning exercise and updated quarterly.</p> |

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| <p>Command & Control Protocols — sovereignty-respecting mechanisms for rapid force integration</p> | <p>Discussion of command sensitivity and C2 asymmetry appears in Section Two (Strategic Nuance and Points of Divergence) and in interview summaries concerning political sensitivities.</p> | <p>Interview evidence: Australian DoD Official (PC-2025) noting asymmetric C2; MFAT/DoD interviews flagging sovereignty concerns. Literature beyond the thesis includes alliance C2 studies and coalition command literature (e.g., studies of NATO C2 arrangements; UK–France CJEF experience).</p> | <p>Coalition C2 literature: pre-negotiated C2 arrangements reduce uncertainty and political friction (NATO STANAG-style logic). Constructivist caution: norms and identity affect willingness to cede authority—hence sovereignty-respecting protocols matter (Wendt, 1999).</p> | <p>Agree a C2 playbook defining thresholds for shared command, liaison structures, and escalation authorities. Indicator: signed C2 protocol and annual exercises validating handover/liaison procedures.</p> |
| <p>Digital Interoperability Standards — shared systems for common situational awareness</p> | <p>Thesis references to information-sharing (Five Eyes) and shallow joint interpretation are drawn from Sections One and Two (A Faltering Environment; Gaps & Risks).</p> | <p>Interview/literature support: interviewees noting data richness but limited shared interpretation; references in thesis to Five Eyes arrangements and to existing information-sharing mechanisms. Supplementary literature: interoperability standards literature; technical governance sources on data standardisation.</p> | <p>Information/information-sharing theory: shared situational awareness increases decision speed and reduces miscalculation (Jervis on perception & misperception; literature on intelligence fusion). Sociotechnical: aligning standards reduces systemic friction (systems interoperability literature).</p> | <p>Define a minimal tech-stack (data formats, secure comms, shared dashboard). Indicator: pilot integration of a maritime domain-awareness feed between two commands and a documented data-sharing protocol.</p> |

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| <p>Joint Capability Working Groups — align acquisition, sustainment, training pipelines</p> | <p>Thesis material on procurement coordination and disparity is in Section Two (Gaps & Risks) and supported by references to NZ DCP (2025) and Australian IID/IIP.</p> | <p>Interviews: NZ MFAT/DoD officials, Australian defence procurement officials; documents: NZ DCP 2025, Australian Integrated Investment Program. Literature: alliance procurement/cooperative acquisition studies.</p> | <p>Public policy & procurement theory: coordinated procurement and shared sustainment reduce lifecycle costs and increase interoperability (defence-industrial integration literature). Alliance burden-sharing: shared procurement is a tangible manifestation of burden-sharing (Beckley; burden-sharing literature).</p> | <p>Create AJOC-led working groups for key capability areas (maritime patrol, logistics, niche capabilities). Indicator: MoU establishing at least one joint working group and a shared road-map for co-acquisition or sustainment within 12–18 months.</p> |
| <p>Anzac Joint Assessment Cell — integrated analysis for shared understanding and warning</p> | <p>The thesis argues that shared interpretation is weak despite abundant data (Sections One & Two; Methodology findings on interview themes).</p> | <p>Interviews indicate large data flows but limited joint interpretation (various MFAT/DoD interview excerpts cited in the report). Literature on joint analysis and indicators-and-warnings supports the need for institutionalised assessment cells.</p> | <p>Decision-support & anticipatory governance: institutionalised joint analysis enhances anticipatory governance and aligns policy responses (literature on indicators-and-warnings; constructivist work on shared narratives; institutionalist emphasis</p> | <p>Establish a joint rotating analytical cell (virtual to start) to produce regular joint assessments and an indicators-and-warnings product. Indicator: inaugural joint assessment distributed to ANZMIN and</p> |

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| | | | on structured coordination). | theatre commands and a standing schedule of outputs. |
| Anzac Pacific Strategy — coordinate diplomacy, development and presence aligned with Pacific agency | Evidence of Pacific agency and NZ’s relational advantages appears in Section One (Framing the Region; A Faltering Environment) and Section Two (The Anzac Case). | Interview/literature support: NZ MFAT & MoD references; Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) materials cited in thesis; interview comments from regional experts. Additional literature: scholarship on regional legitimacy, small state agency, and soft power. | Regional legitimacy & norms: sustaining regional partnerships requires alignment with Pacific priorities (constructivist emphasis on norms and legitimacy; regionalism literature). Soft-power and influence: coordinated development and diplomacy are instruments of stable engagement that support durable security arrangements (Nye; development-security nexus literature). | Draft an Anzac Pacific Strategy under the AJOC focusing on coordinated aid, maritime security, and presence. Indicator: joint strategy consulted, published, and presented at relevant regional fora (e.g. PIF) with ministerial endorsement. |

Appendix B - Case Study: Solomon Islands Response²⁰

The Solomon Islands episode is analytically useful because it sharpens an otherwise abstract distinction between Australia and New Zealand: **differences of strategic personality** that condition policy choices and operational tempo. Small and middle powers vary not only in material capacity but in predispositions—risk appetite, normative commitments, and institutional preferences—that shape foreign policy behaviour. Australia’s strategic personality has tended toward an extroverted, capacity-centred pragmatism with a predisposition for forward posture and alliance leverage; New Zealand’s tends toward normative multilateralism, Pacific-focussed diplomacy, and greater sensitivity to sovereignty and domestic legitimacy constraints. These trait-like tendencies help explain divergent operational choices in the Solomon Islands case.

RAMSI (2003–2017) exemplified **complementary roles**: Australia supplied security capacity and resources; New Zealand contributed diplomatic legitimacy and relational access to Pacific networks. Scholarly appraisals credit RAMSI with notable short-term stabilisation while highlighting its limits in addressing deep social and governance deficits (poverty, local grievance, state capacity) that underlie instability. The partnership model therefore worked tactically but left structural vulnerabilities unaddressed.

The 2021–22 deterioration in Solomon Islands politics — and the subsequent security arrangement with China — exposed the fault lines. Honiara’s security pact with Beijing and the rapid intensification of geopolitical competition reveal that **local actors can and do exploit great-power rivalry to redress domestic priorities**, complicating Canberra’s and Wellington’s assumptions about influence and access. Analyses of the 2022 pact highlight that the agreement materially rewrote regional dynamics by enabling a security foothold for China, especially in policing, and underscored Canberra’s policy shortfalls in anticipating political realignments in Honiara.

Practically, this case reveals three operational lessons that map directly to AJOC design:

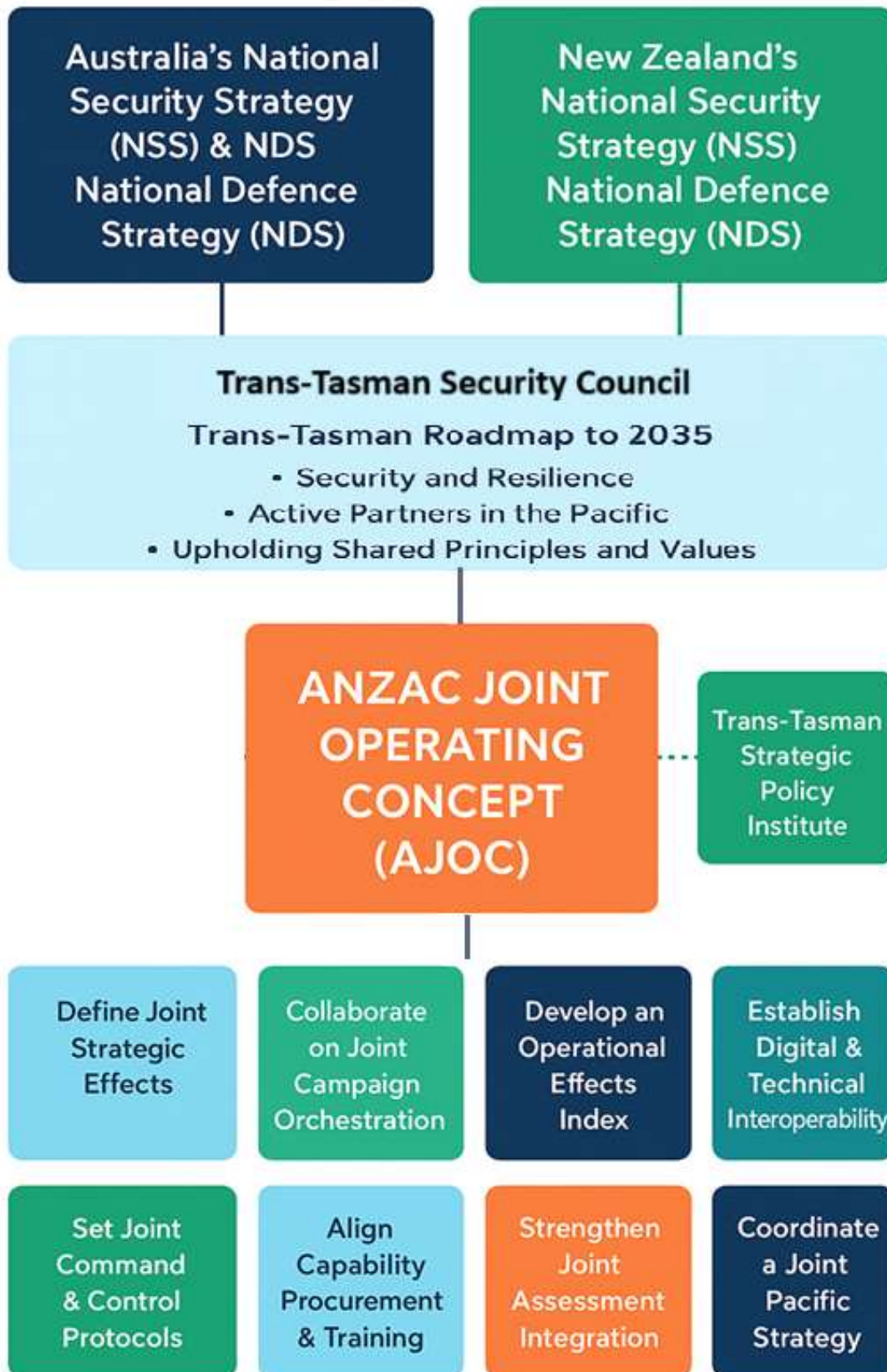
- **Tempo and decision-authority mismatch.** Australia’s institutional willingness and capacity to move quickly (e.g. operational deployments, diplomatic pressure) contrasts with New Zealand’s preference for consultative, legitimacy-centred responses. Without joint assessments and contingency plans, this mismatch produces reactive friction and missed opportunities for anticipatory engagement.
- **Differing policy endgames.** Australia often foregrounds denial and stability; New Zealand foregrounds Pacific agency and normative legitimacy. In Honiara these aims can conflict—NZ’s need to preserve relational trust in the Pacific can make public coercive signalling by Canberra politically costly for Wellington. AJOC mechanisms (shared thresholds, jointly agreed campaign phasing) can reconcile intent by making trade-offs explicit in advance.
- **Rivalry is an opportunity for the local state.** Solomon Islands’ leaders successfully “leveraged geopolitical competition” to extract resources and political space; allies therefore need sustained political and development footprints, not episodic security interventions, to

²⁰ For further reading see Allen & Dinnen, (2016); Badmus, (2022); Powles (2023); Wallis & Powles, (2018)

inoculate against external alternatives. This underlines recommendations for an Anzac Pacific Strategy.

Finally, the case carries cautionary risks: **deeper trans-Tasman integration must avoid appearing as a bilateral securitisation** of the Pacific or as a substitute for Pacific agency, or it will drive partners towards alternative patrons. The AJOC should therefore prioritise transparency, Pacific co-design (where feasible), and legal-political safeguards (e.g. basing/access protocols and public communications) to mitigate misperception risks.

Appendix C – AJOC Structural Diagram



Appendix D — Interview Log

Ethics approval: Massey University Ethics Notification 4000030641. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

| Interviewee (anonymised) | Role / affiliation | Date | Mode | Notes |
|-------------------------------------|--|----------------|---------------------|--|
| <i>DoD Official</i> | Senior Australian defence official | 01 July 2025 | VTC | Strategic advantages, current outlook, current blind spots. |
| Prof. David Capie | Professor of strategic studies (NZ) | 04 July 2025 | VTC | Interoperability, force design |
| <i>DFAT Official</i> | Senior Australian foreign affairs official | 07 July 2025 | VTC | Bilateral coordination, ANZMIN, Australia broader equities |
| <i>MFAT Official</i> | Senior NZ foreign affairs official | 10 July 2025 | VTC | Policy process and Pacific engagement |
| Prof. Robert Patman | Professor of strategic studies (NZ) | 22 July 2025 | VTC | Alliance theory, regional politics |
| Jennifer Parker | Regional expert / think-tank (Pacific) | 28 July 2025 | VTC | Australian warfighting pivot. China threat. Alliance asymmetry. Interoperability |
| <i>DoD Official</i> | Senior Australian defence official | 31 July 2025 | In-person and Phone | Current strategy initiatives, constraints on policy |
| GPCAPT (Retd) Nick Olney | Ex-NZDF senior officer | 01 August 2025 | VTC, in person | Operational readiness, Pacific deployments |
| Prof. John Blaxland | Professor of strategic studies (AUS) | 13 August 2025 | VTC, in person | Alliance theory, regional politics, US retreat, Pacific approach |
| <i>MoD Official</i> | Senior NZ Defence official | 14 August 2025 | VTC, in person | Operational integration initiatives, blind spots. |

Note:

All interviews were conducted with the participant’s informed consent and subsequently anonymised where requested. Where a role identifier (e.g., ‘DoD Official’) is used in the text, it corresponds to the anonymised ID in this appendix. Per APA 7th ed. guidance, these interviews are cited in-text as personal communications and are not included in the main reference list.