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THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY THREAT TO NEW ZEALAND, REALLY?

Jack Seabrook¹

This article assesses the nature and extent of the threat posed by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) to New Zealand, arguing that the danger is real but primarily indirect. Drawing on contemporary Chinese military strategy, a primary-source dataset of PLA activity across the Indo-Pacific, and emerging scholarship on China's evolving defence posture, the article demonstrates New Zealand is unlikely to face a conventional military attack. Instead, the PLA's transformation into a joint, networked, and increasingly "intelligentized" force is reshaping the regional strategic environment on which New Zealand's security and prosperity depend. Three interlocking risks emerge. First, PLA capabilities to contest American power and Indo-Pacific sovereignty heighten the likelihood and prospective severity of a major-power conflict in which New Zealand's interests would be deeply engaged, even if it were not a principal combatant. Second, the PLA's growing ability to monitor, disrupt, and potentially strike across the Indian and Pacific Oceans threatens New Zealand's sea lines of communication, undersea infrastructure, and the safety of deployed forces. Third, China's expanding military reach amplifies the coercive leverage Beijing can exert through economic dependence, disinformation, and political influence, narrowing Wellington's strategic choices.

The article concludes that New Zealand must respond by enhancing national resilience, improving domain awareness, investing in niche military capabilities, and working more closely with regional partners. Rather than preparing for invasion, New Zealand must adapt to an Indo-Pacific order increasingly shaped by PLA presence, reach, and coercive potential.

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Introduction

As far back as 2018, Xi Jinping ordered his military to “prepare for war.”¹ As a result, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has consolidated a large magazine-depth of stocks and reserves, rehearsed invasions, and conducted deterrence patrols. Once prepared though, militaries rarely remain idle. Amidst growing public awareness of the Indo-Pacific’s strategic security environment, indicators of Chinese military and economic assertiveness, and unsubtle American efforts to maintain a unipolar status quo, New Zealand is right to wonder what threats it may face in the coming decade. It is tempting to reach for cinematic images of amphibious forces steaming into Auckland Harbour or rockets striking Parliament, but that is not a useful way for a fiscally constrained, trade-dependent state to think about risk. Australia’s Professor Paul Dobb has attempted to disabuse New Zealanders of misguided notions it is under direct military threat, arguing New Zealand “must not waste time or money on such worst-case contingencies as an invasion or direct military attack.”² The more serious dangers lie in how the PLA is reshaping the strategic environment in which New Zealand lives, trades, and aligns itself. These dangers include the changing stability of the wider Indo-Pacific order, the vulnerability of New Zealand’s partners in maritime Asia, and the coercive leverage Beijing could acquire over Wellington’s choices in crisis.

Over the past decade, the PLA – the army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) more than of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – has transformed from a largely continental force into a joint, networked military with a focus on ‘intelligentized warfare’ using its rapidly growing maritime, air, cyber, and space capabilities.³ You Ji describes how China’s defence strategy has moved from a narrow focus on territorial defence to “frontier defence,” in which the PLA must protect “open-ended frontiers of national and economic security interests” across the Indo-Pacific maritime commons.⁴ At the same time, China has invested heavily in remote sensing and other enabling systems that allow it to monitor and, in time, hold the United States (US) and its allies at risk from a longer range. While not yet comparable in global, power projection, Chinese capabilities are more than sufficient to complicate allied operations in the Western and Southern Pacific Ocean. These shifts could indicate the CCP is following a grand strategy to first control China, secondly secure its interests across Southeast Asia and adjacent oceans (maritime Asia),⁵ and thirdly disrupt any external threats to its hegemony across strategic Asia.⁶

New Zealand’s own perception of China has shifted in response.⁷ This is reasonable, as “Beijing’s actions and Washington’s reactions will cause volatility and uncertainty in Southeast Asia and Oceania.”⁸ Reuben Steff notes Wellington has moved from seeing Beijing as an “important strategic partner” to identifying it as a revisionist actor whose behaviour “is placing structural pressure on New Zealand to react.”⁹ New strategy

documents released over 2023-2024, along with debates about possible participation in the counter-PRC AUKUS agreement's Pillar II, indicate that concerns about the PLA's regional behaviour are now central to New Zealand defence planning.¹⁰

This paper argues the threat the PLA poses to New Zealand is real but primarily indirect. There is no conventional invasion threat. Rather, the PLA poses a combination of three interlocking risks. First the PLA's ability to compete with and contest American leadership and Indo-Pacific sovereignty raises the prospect of major war in which New Zealand's national interests would be deeply engaged, even if it were not a principal combatant. Second, the PLA is steadily improving capabilities to monitor, disrupt, and, if necessary, strike across the Indian and Pacific Oceans in ways that could threaten New Zealand's maritime approaches, trade routes, undersea infrastructure, and expeditionary deployments. Third, Chinese military power and political influence activities have generated coercive pressure on New Zealand and its immediate region, narrowing strategic choices.

This paper proceeds in three sections. Firstly, it will examine the evolution of Chinese military strategy with particular attention to the maritime and Indo-Pacific dimensions. The following section draws on a dataset of primary sources (official, reliable media, and social media) to examine the pattern of PLA capabilities and operations in maritime Asia and the Pacific. Subsequently, this essay analyses how these developments relate to Chinese intentions in New Zealand's immediate region in the 2025-2032 timeframe – that of a potential Sino-American war.¹¹

Chinese Strategy

Chinese strategy and the frameworks officials consider it through have evolved over the last hundred years. Where Mao Zedong sought revolution, Deng Xiaoping wanted to consolidate control and share prosperity. By 2022, Xi Jinping indicated to the CCP's 20th National Party Congress a preemptive declaration that China would seek hegemony over the South China Sea (SCS) by 2049.¹² Initially, Western leaders largely ignored preliminary indicators of China's efforts to move from its inward focus and acceptance of American hegemony, to building Chinese regional power especially through industrial and cyber espionage.¹³ While military capability was generated, cyber and influence actions started shaping China's strategic environment, specifically blunting America's and the West's technological, diplomatic, economic, and military-capability advantages.¹⁴

Espionage and cyber influence operations evolved into physical harassment tactics in the SCS. Notably PLA vessels and aircraft (and their Coastguard and maritime militia counterparts) would disrupt safe maritime and air navigation,¹⁵ to the point recently when a PLA Navy (PLA-N) ship cut through their own coastguard's bow as the two harassed a Philippine vessel.¹⁶ If this is the initial preparatory phase ahead of securing the

SCS, it seems a reasonable judgement that such escalation of disruption tactics could expand to the perimeters of Chinese interests in the Southwest Pacific. If the PLA-N can expand from coastal defence to dominating the Nine-Dash Line, then loose blockades around Pacific ports and other resources that Beijing values seem like a realistic possibility. Such dominance has clearly been enabled by Chinese land-reclamation and subsequent militarisation – arguably this has been forward-deploying PLA “defences.” Given the vulnerability and susceptibility of some atoll nations, the Southwest Pacific would become a disruption zone if even one atoll or reef was converted into a Chinese military possession.¹⁷

Chinese military strategy is codified through what the Academy of Military Science calls “strategic guidelines.” The first of these is identifying the strategic opponent (战略对手), based on assessments of China’s international environment and perceived threats. The strategic opponent’s specific military threat determines the operational target (作战对象). The second guideline is identifying the primary strategic direction (主要战略方向), referring to geographic focal points for potential conflict, and thus determine resource and effort prioritisation. The third guideline is the basis of preparations for military struggle (军事斗争准备的基点), which describes the characteristics of future wars China may fight. This is usually based on an assessment of the form of war (战争形态) or the conduct of warfare at any point in time and the “pattern of operations” (作战样式) to be pursued. The fourth guideline is the basic guiding approach (基本指导思想) for campaigns and operations, outlining general operational principles.¹⁸

Over the last two decades, this framework has evolved to enable a shift from continental and internal threats to maritime and external threats.¹⁹ The PLA has shifted from an exclusive focus on “local wars under modern high-technology conditions” to fighting “regional informatized wars,” and more recently to preparing for “intelligitized warfare” that integrates artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and space-based sensors.²⁰ The main strategic direction appears to be the Western Pacific, based on Marty Reep’s analysis that, “As China expands its stronghold in the SCS and the [East China Sea], it is creating a buffer zone between itself and the outside world.”²¹ But, as Ji argues, this maritime focus now extends to a two-ocean strategy that links the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean – driven in part by a need to protect China’s sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and partly by Chinese concerns India will take advantage of a Sino-American War by starting a “1.5 war” to further Indian strategic objectives.²²

When applying these guidelines and frameworks to contemporary security concerns, the CCP is clear in its intent to expand its hegemony in maritime Asia into global hegemony. In 2021, China’s leaders declared a “period of historical opportunity” [历史机遇期] had emerged to expand the country’s strategic focus from Asia to the wider globe and its governance systems. Where once it was reasonable to think Chinese politico-military manoeuvring was regionally limited, this sentiment and Xi’s confidence that “time and momentum” favoured Chinese ambitions suggest the CCP’s goals had

become global, and thus so too had the PLA's.²³ Xi's speeches suggested the global order he envisions would see the PLA gain bases around the world to defend China's interests in most regions and even in new domains like space, the poles, and the deep sea. The visibility of these goals in high-level speeches is strong evidence China's ambitions are not limited to Taiwan nor to dominating its adjacent seas.²⁴ However, sceptics believe China's strategy is limited, arguing the CCP is primarily focused on development and domestic stability.²⁵ But, this scepticism allows for a strategy where the first priority is 'control of China.' Arguing no strategy could "cover all the aspects of [Chinese] national interests,"²⁶ fails to consider the CCP's evolution since control has been consolidated and regional/global expansion has become necessary to maintain that control.

Two concepts are particularly important for assessing the threat of China's strategy to New Zealand. The first is 'frontier defence.' This expands the notion of defence beyond China's land borders to include those "new open-ended frontiers of national and economic security interests," Ji mentioned as they exist across the global commons.²⁷ Frontier defence requires not only territorial defence but the ability to project naval and air power into distant seas, supported by space and cyber shaping operations. From Beijing's perspective, this legitimises a more forward-leaning PLA presence across the Indo-Pacific and into the South Pacific whenever Chinese economic or political interests can be advanced. This pairs with the 'open-ended frontiers' that Chinese planners fear India will exploit. These concerns reinforce the imperative to develop long-range naval and air forces that can operate beyond the immediate littoral areas of operations, such as the PLA-Navy's shift from a green-water fleet to a blue-water navy.²⁸ (Demonstrating that, China's long-range capability was possibly intended to inform India's interpretation of Task Force 107's circumnavigation of Australia as a signal of the PLA's ability to reach the Western Indian Ocean.)²⁹ The consequence is a PLA that thinks of the Indo-Pacific as a single, connected theatre in which crises in one sub-region reverberate elsewhere.

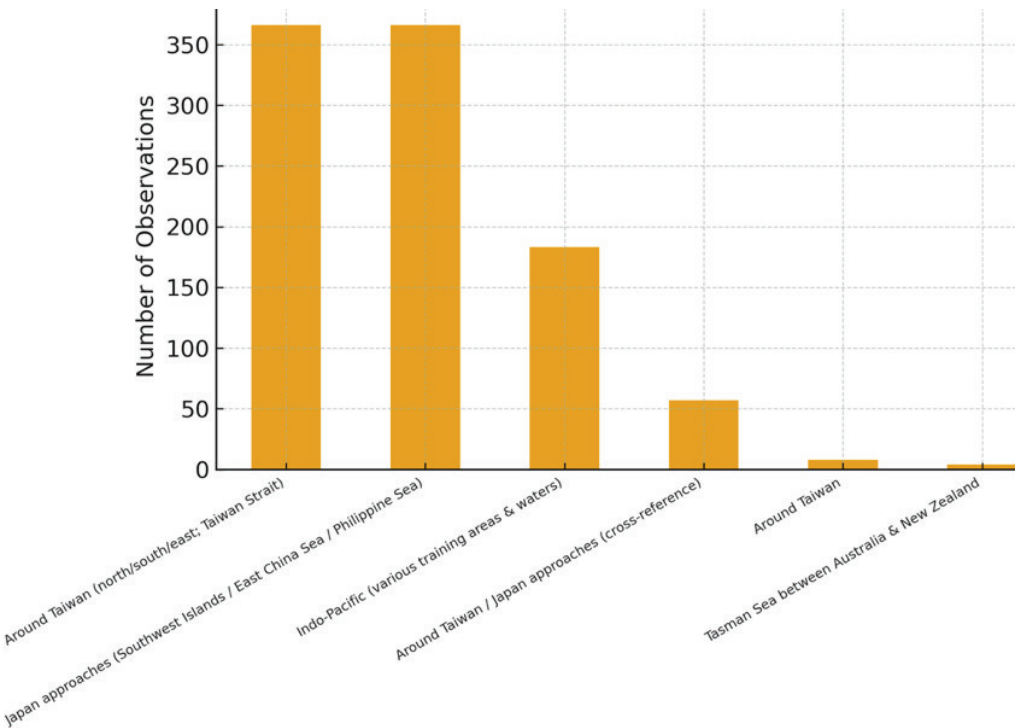
Comparatively, Rush Doshi argues Chinese strategy amounts to three phases focused on their adversary rather than simply geography – matching the primacy of 'strategic opponent' before 'strategic direction.'³⁰ Specifically, Doshi asserts three sequential "strategies of displacement," first blunting American regional hegemony, then secondly building China's. The third strategy expands the first two to blunt American global hegemony while building China's. Arguably, therefore, China's grand strategy would see success in its immediate region expand into New Zealand's.

At the operational level, Taylor Fravel's analysis of Chinese strategy clearly focuses on a central theme of regaining control of Taiwan. This strategy focused on joint firepower strike, blockade operations, amphibious/air attack operations, joint blockade and attack landings (combining the prior two operational concepts), and two-front wars against Taiwan and India simultaneously.³¹ However, China's 2015 white paper suggests this has evolved into "information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points, joint

operations to gain victory” (信息主导, 精打要害, 联合制胜). Comparing the PLA’s 2013 doctrine *The Science of Military Strategy* to events of the last ten years – from unsafe, unprofessional flying; to aggressive naval and coastguard postures in the SCS; and coercive cyber/information operations – suggests PLA activities are conforming to both doctrine and their 2015 military strategy.³² Notably, these activities are not directed at New Zealand (while distinguishing New Zealand from NZDF elements joining likeminded militaries patrolling East Asia), but they shape the kinds of capabilities the PLA is introducing and upgrading, namely long-range ballistic and cruise missiles, blue-water naval forces, carrier aviation, airborne and amphibious assault units, and the command and control systems to integrate them.³³

In short, Chinese military strategy is not primarily about projecting hard power to the far South Pacific in peacetime. It is about securing, or at least not losing, a major theatre war against the US and its allies in maritime Asia, while protecting China’s economic lifelines to the Indian Ocean. However, the means the PLA is acquiring for that task – space-based surveillance, long-range strike, blue-water naval forces and information operations – have implications for distant small states that lie along those lifelines or host key infrastructure. New Zealand is one of those states.

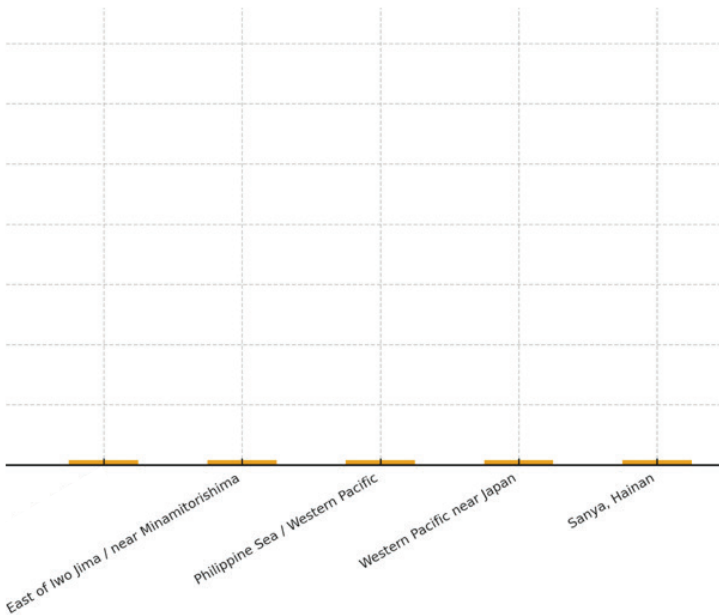
Figure 1: Top ten geographic locations of observed People’s Liberation Army activity, November 2024–November 2025. Data compiled from Taiwan Ministry of National Defense daily PLA activity bulletins, Japan Ministry of Defence Joint Staff press releases; Reuters; Naval News, USNI News; Associated Press; and multiple open source intelligence image posts. Dataset generated by the author.



Data analytics of Chinese capabilities in the Pacific

To move beyond doctrine, this research involved compiling a large open-source dataset of PLA and related Chinese security forces' activity across the wider Indo-Pacific over the last year, complemented by a five-year sub-dataset for the Southwest Pacific. The primary dataset covers 1025 observed events, drawing on government statements, reputable media, and OSINT-focused social-media accounts such as Vermillion_China, ALCON.S2 and HM_Intelligence. Each entry coded the date, location, capability, platform, activity type, capability category, source, and a confidence note. While the data inevitably suffers from reporting and selection bias – not all activities are public, and social-media coverage is uneven – it provides a useful lens on the pattern of Chinese military behaviour.

Several findings stand out and suggest there is little chance of major PLA military projection into the South Pacific. First, the geographical distribution of activity is heavily weighted towards the SCS, the Taiwan Strait, and adjacent Western Pacific waters. A substantial proportion of recorded events are presence operations by Chinese destroyers, frigates, and coastguard vessels around disputed features in the Spratly and Paracel Islands; air incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ); and long-range bomber and fighter patrols into the Philippine Sea. This aligns with scholarly analyses that identify the SCS and Taiwan as the main strategic directions for Chinese maritime and air forces.³⁴



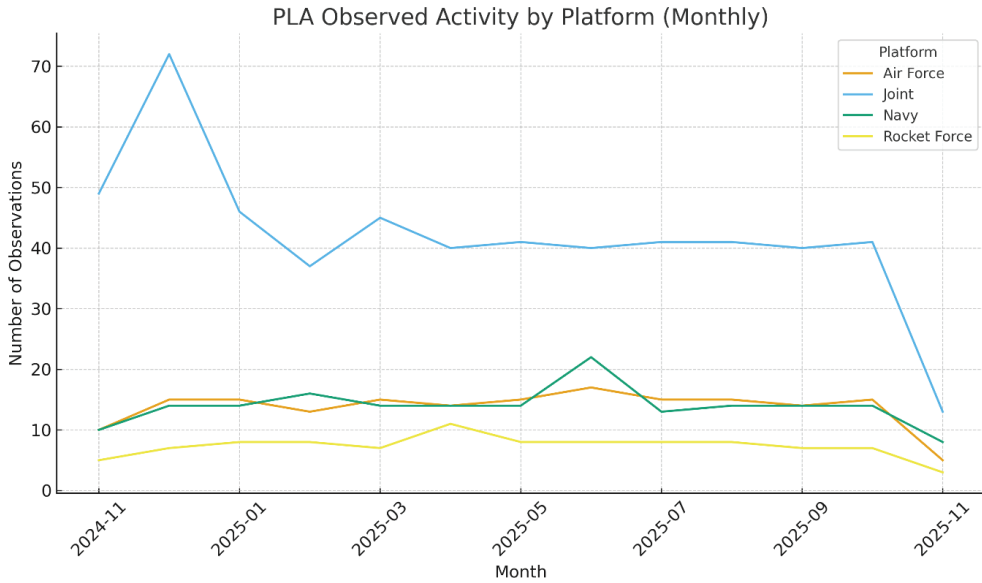


Figure 2: Monthly PLA activity by platform, November 2024–November 2025. Data compiled from Taiwan Ministry of National Defense daily PLA activity bulletins, Japan Ministry of Defence Joint Staff press releases; Reuters; Naval News, USNI News; Associated Press; and multiple open source intelligence image posts. Dataset generated by the author.

Secondly, the dataset confirms a steady pattern likely to indicate the PLA’s secondary strategic effort is Southeast Asia’s surrounding seas. Missile tests and exercises involving anti-ship and anti-air systems are prominent (though often framed domestically as responses to perceived “provocations”). Coding of activity types shows a blend of routine presence patrolling, coercive signalling, live-fire training, and, occasionally, close intercepts of foreign vessels and aircraft (including NZDF and Australian platforms.) Notably, 2025 showed relatively consistent levels of activity throughout the year, with a major focus on joint operations, especially in Southeast Asia. These events are often accompanied by state-media narratives emphasising China’s willingness to “safeguard sovereignty” and “oppose external interference,” reinforcing their political intent and overall three-phase strategy.

Thirdly, there is a smaller but non-trivial cluster of activity in the Southwest Pacific. These have appeared in New Zealand and Pacific media, such as ballistic-missile testing, PLA-N Task Force 107, and aid deliveries.³⁵ A second data subset was collated to focus on these, resulting in 81 entries over a five-year period. Analysis of this secondary dataset identifies Chinese naval and auxiliary visits to Pacific Island states, participation in humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief exercises, and occasional joint training

with local forces. In a few cases, Chinese intelligence-gathering vessels have operated in or near the exclusive economic zones of Pacific partners during major allied exercises, such as Talisman Sabre or RIMPAC, presumably to collect electronic intelligence and observe allied tactics. Notably, sparsity is a signal – genuine PLA activity in the South Pacific remains episodic. Analysis of Chinese “dual-purpose” vessels suggest several non-PLA vessels likely also contribute to the PLA’s intelligence.³⁶ These operations mirror what the China’s Remote Sensing report describes as a broader pattern of using space, air, and maritime platforms to build “dedicated maritime awareness” and track foreign forces.³⁷ Such information could inform potential Chinese disruption activities or influence operations against Australia and New Zealand’s major SLOCs to the north.

Fourth, the primary dataset’s capability categories and platforms show a maturing joint force. Surface combatants are the workhorses of Chinese presence operations, but they are increasingly accompanied by modern multi-role fighters, bombers, special-mission aircraft and uncrewed systems on, over, and under water. Open-source reporting indicates long-range bombers have flown sorties along the First Island Chain and into the Western Pacific, while uncrewed aerial systems and maritime drones are being tested for reconnaissance and targeting. Furthermore, social-media imagery frequently highlights the latest destroyer classes, new amphibious-assault ships, and replenishment vessels, all of which extend the operational radius of Chinese task groups.

Finally, the dataset underscores the enabling role of remote sensing. While satellite passes are not always visible in public reporting, the timing and pattern of some maritime operations – for example, the rapid appearance of Chinese vessels near American and allied task groups – suggests China is increasingly able to cue its forces from space-based intelligence. The *China’s Remote Sensing* report notes the Yaogan and Shijian constellations now provide broad ocean surveillance and synthetic-aperture-radar triplet formations that can track mobile naval assets in all weather conditions.³⁸ This means any allied or partner force, including New Zealand deployments to the Western or Southern Pacific, will likely operate under much closer Chinese observation than in the past.

Of course, caution is needed in drawing strong causal inferences from open-source activity data. Media and social-media sources over-report dramatic events and under-report routine patrols. Some locations and activity types are more visible than others. Nevertheless, the picture that emerges is consistent, the PLA is becoming more active, more joint, and more outward-facing across the broader Indo-Pacific, including in sub-regions of direct concern to New Zealand. The threat is not that Chinese forces are about to surge into the Southern Ocean, but that New Zealand lives inside a region where PLA presence and reach are now constants rather than exceptions.

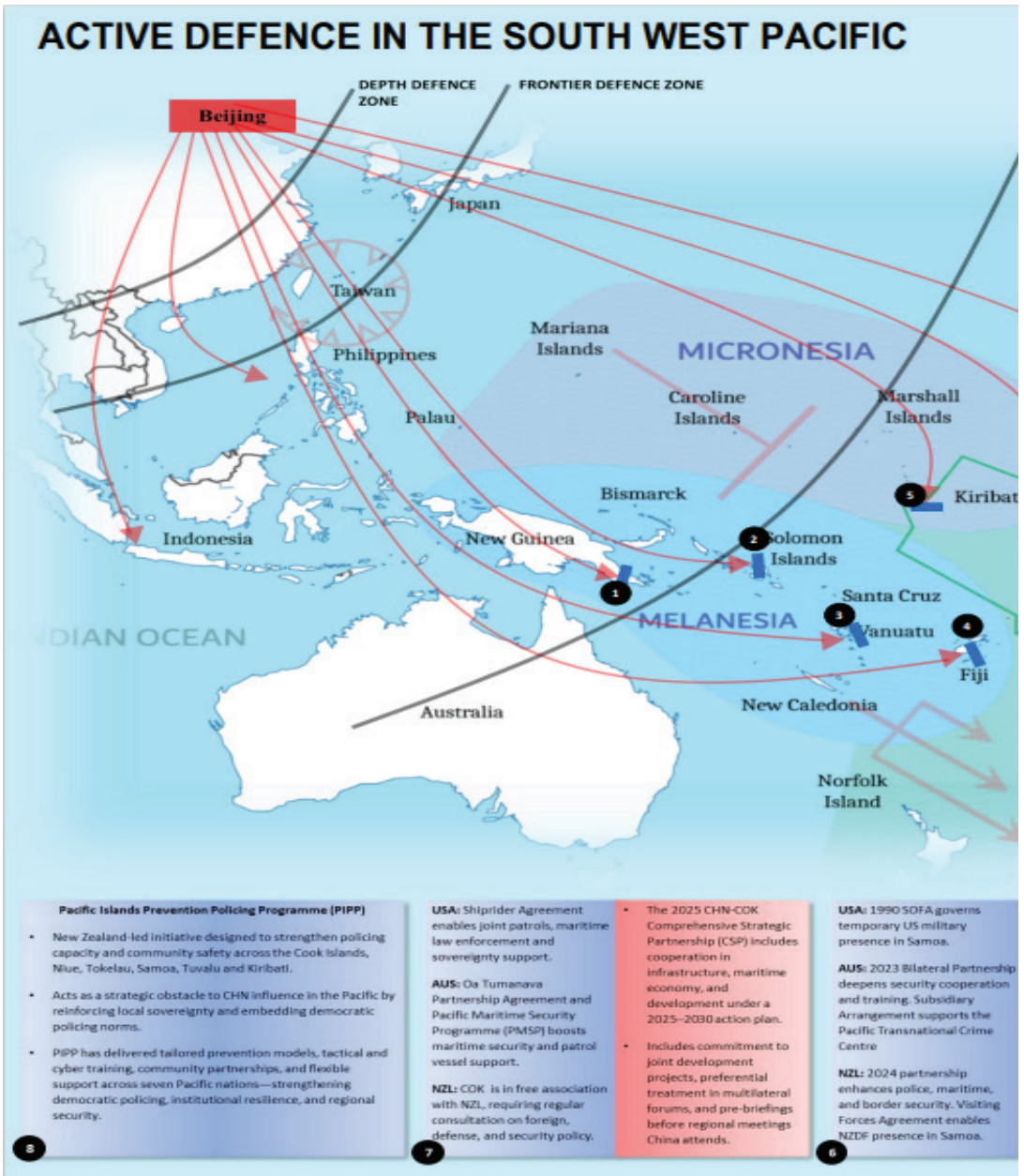
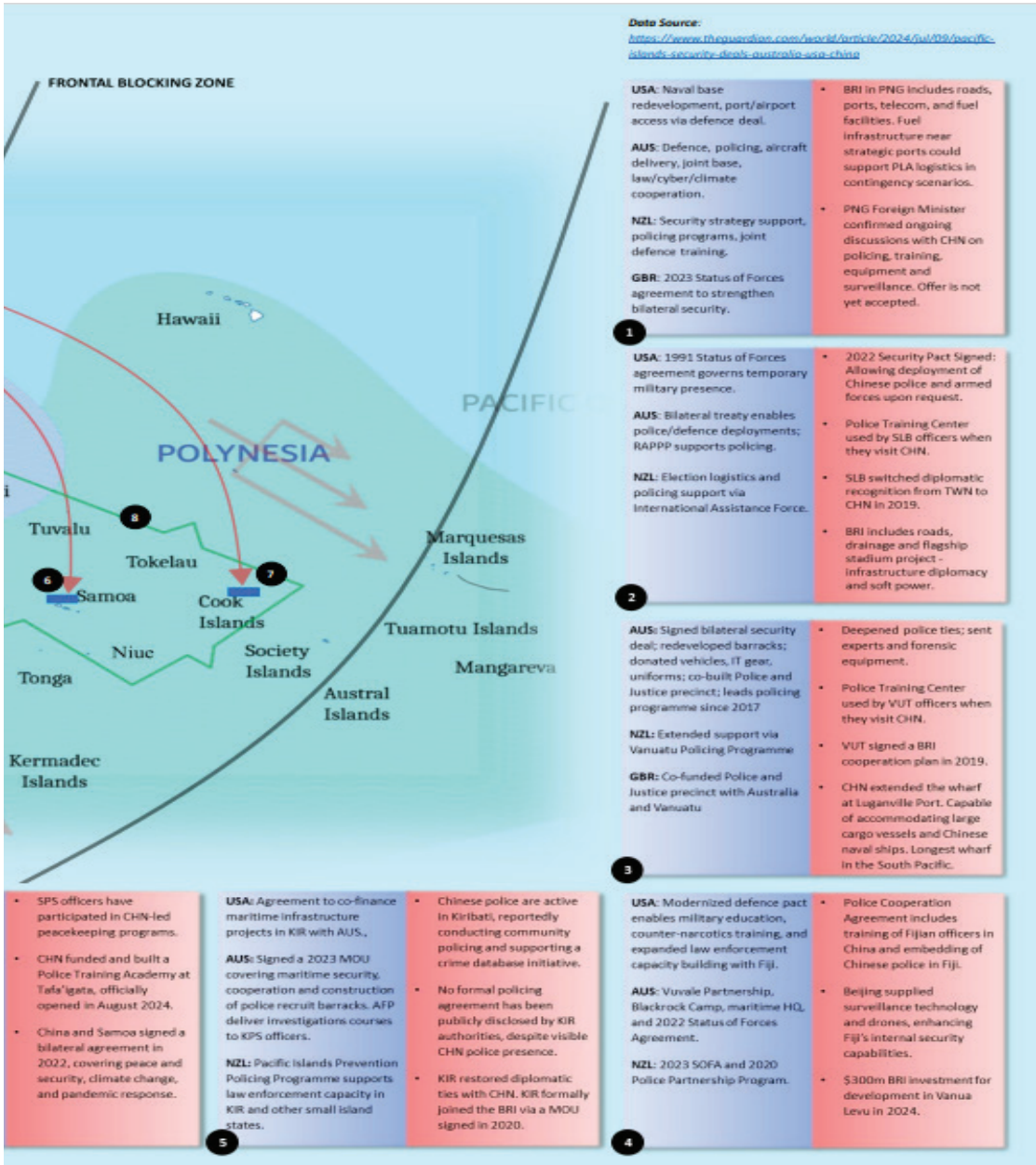


Figure 3. Chinese ‘Active Defence’ through diplomatic engagement across the Pacific and countervailing western efforts. Data sourced from Prianka Srivivasan & Virginia Harrison, “Mapped: the vast network of security deals spanning the Pacific, and what it means,” The Guardian.



Chinese intentions in New Zealand's immediate region

If PLA capabilities are increasingly global in reach, what does Beijing actually want in New Zealand's immediate region? Intent is harder to infer from open sources than capability, but several potential themes can be identified. Firstly, China seeks to prevent encirclement and to weaken the alliance networks underpinning American and Australian influence in the Indo-Pacific. In Ji's account, Chinese strategists see the US "pivot" and associated island-chain concepts as an attempt to contain China's maritime rise.³⁹ From Beijing's perspective, the South Pacific is part of a wider arc in which hostile powers might seek bases to threaten Chinese SLOCs or to support operations against Chinese forces in East Asia. This perspective causes friction with the 2015 Central Military Commission white paper statement that the PLA-N "will gradually shift from 'near seas defense' (近岸防御) to the combination of 'near seas defense' and 'far seas protection' (远海护卫)".⁴⁰

Analysis of China's grand strategy at a military level notes a shift from 'sea control' to a 'sea denial' strategy, whereby holding distant territory is less important than preventing adversary access.⁴¹ This change in thinking shifted Beijing from costly capabilities (like aircraft carriers) to the world's largest surface and submarine fleets, drones, and the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile. This approach when coupled with the PLA's doctrinal concepts of information deterrence and information attacks indicates the PLA will likely seek to impose a denial strategy on any areas – like the South Pacific – that it does not wish to directly control.⁴² Chinese military and diplomatic engagement in the region therefore serves both to complicate allied planning and to secure access for Chinese vessels. *Figure 3* compiles Chinese diplomatic agreements and American/Australia/New Zealand initiatives to counter them, suggesting a priority on diplomatic influence and sometimes control, over military sea control and sea denial. This graphic analysis reasonably supports analysis suggesting China's three-phase strategy across the Pacific.

Secondly, New Zealand's immediate region is increasingly intertwined with China's economic and technological projects. Port investments, undersea cable projects, satellite ground stations and other dual-use infrastructure are not openly controlled by the PLA. However, they create potential footholds and dependencies that could be leveraged in crisis. Instances of Chinese underwater-cable-cutting patents, overseas installations, and telecommunications infrastructure suggest preparedness to protect Chinese information lines of communication and threaten the West's. When linked to the PLA's remote sensing and communications architecture, such infrastructure could enhance Chinese situational awareness in the Southwest Pacific and enable more persistent presence.

Wang Ronghui has argued for 'dissipative warfare' in the *PLA Daily*, whereby leaders focus on intensifying political isolation, economic blockades, and diplomatic strangu-

lation, over combat.⁴³ Meanwhile, the “system destruction warfare” framework of intelligitized warfare emphasises the paralysis of an enemy’s ability to function through attacks on command and control nodes and the communications/logistics links around them – over battlefield annihilation.⁴⁴ This theory of intelligitized warfare seems particularly applicable to the Southwest Pacific given the military limitations in projecting force there. Thus, with or without a Pacific base, PLA thinking already includes diplomatic and economic manoeuvres complementing operational harassment tactics (such as extra-territorial police stations or maritime militias.) Simply, dissipative warfare focuses on maintaining domestic order and creating disorder in an adversary’s system, matching this paper’s analysis of the CCP grand strategy’s priorities.

In a worst case scenario, the establishment of a PRC-owned port in the Pacific would erase New Zealand and Australia’s distance advantage and almost certainly absorb all Anzac security efforts – reducing the threat to China’s higher priorities by two of the Five Eyes. This paper’s data analysis indicates PLA activity density in the Southwest Pacific is not random. It clusters around capital ports with political/strategic value (Port Vila, Honiara, Suva) and aligns to humanitarian or influence missions. Coercive or high-end naval signalling is episodic (e.g., Task Force 107), while soft-power presence is sustained.

Thirdly, Beijing aims to prevent small states, including New Zealand, from aligning too closely with US-led coalitions that would threaten Chinese interests. Steff’s analysis of New Zealand’s balancing approach to China emphasises that Wellington has pursued an “asymmetric hedging strategy” that seeks to “spread risk wide to mitigate potential calamity,” by maintaining strong economic ties with China but deepening defence cooperation with the US and Australia.⁴⁵ While New Zealand seems to be more clearly committing to US-leaning multilateral and minilateral initiatives, China maintains pressure on New Zealand politicians and Sino-New Zealand trade remains a government priority.⁴⁶ From Beijing’s perspective, moves such as potential New Zealand participation in AUKUS Pillar II, NATO’s Indo-Pacific 4 Format, closer cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, and increased presence in regional exercises may be viewed as steps towards hostile encirclement. Chinese state media and diplomatic messaging have warned regional states against choosing sides. The PLA provides the latent coercive backdrop to those messages.

At odds with this external messaging is conflicting propaganda. Verified and unverified Chinese commentators (possibly linked to the state and thus the PLA), such as @BeijingDai⁴⁷ and @Zhao_Dashuai,⁴⁸ have posted narratives suggesting Australia’s suitability for Chinese invasion by way of seizing New Zealand. Such information has the realistic possibility of threatening government understanding and splitting domestic political cohesion in a way that distracts New Zealand leaders from less obvious threats – much in the same way other disinformation has absorbed significant time and effort.⁴⁹



A post by verified Chinese commentator DaiWW (@BeijingDai) has reignited serious concern about Beijing's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. In his statement, DaiWW openly describes the "annexation of Australia" as a cost-effective strategic goal, claiming the continent's vast resources and sparse population make it an easy and valuable target.

The accompanying map titled "China and Its Territories" labels Australia as the South China Protectorate, New Zealand as the Xin Zilan Protectorate, and Southeast Asia under varying shades of Chinese control. It lays out a chilling vision of a region absorbed under Beijing's dominance through trade, dependency, and eventual subordination.

DaiWW argues that conquering Southeast Asia would be too difficult because of its population size and economic complexity, but that taking Australia would be simple, resource-rich, and "morally justified." He further claims that Australia "lacks morality and legitimacy" because it was founded on the genocide of its Indigenous population, asserting that the downfall of such a nation is "predetermined" under Chinese values.

Australian commentator Aus Integrity (@QBCCIntegrity) responded by questioning whether ASIO takes such intelligence seriously. They suggested the post may reflect a wider psychological campaign, noting the claim that Australians could be relocated to Tasmania and New Zealand as part of an international carve-up between China and the United States.

Whether DaiWW's remarks reflect official Chinese policy or personal ideology, the fact that such narratives are being openly shared by verified accounts should alarm every policymaker in Canberra. Australia's sovereignty is being discussed as a commodity, and those conversations are no longer hidden in the shadows.

15 hours ago



Figures 5 and 6: Instagram user @theyarn_reporting Chinese commentator DaiWW (@BeijingDai) describing the “annexation of Australia.”

Between Chinese governmental pressure and latent PLA coercive force, these intentions translate into a set of potential threats for New Zealand. The most direct is the risk New Zealand forces, operating alongside allies in a major Indo-Pacific contingency, will find themselves under Chinese surveillance and possibly caught in a crossfire in the event of hostilities. Several commentators have argued the potential for miscalculation between opposing military forces in East and Southeast Asia is considerable. This is worsened by threatening PLA manoeuvres – unsafe flying, aggressive ship manoeuvring – which the PLA outlines as necessary in Science of Military Strategy's 'Strategic Deterrence' chapter.⁵⁰ China's military strategy notes space and cyber domains are "commanding heights of strategic competition," suggesting passive surveillance at least already occurs⁵¹ – possibly inferred by three surveillance ships entering the Southwest Pacific from 05 December 2025.



Figure 7: Dual-purpose PLA-N surveillance ships Yang Wang 5, 6, and 7, ordinarily used for tracking satellites, rockets, and ballistic missiles, deployed to the Southwest Pacific as of 05 December 2025.

A second threat is to critical infrastructure. Undersea cables, offshore energy platforms, satellite ground stations, and key ports in and around New Zealand could become targets for Chinese cyber operations, space-based interference or, in extremis, long-range kinetic attacks, especially if they are used to support American and Australian military operations. The PLA does not need the ability to invade New Zealand to threaten its prosperity and connectivity. Disrupting communications, trade routes, and access would suffice to raise the costs of allied cooperation and to pressure Wellington into crisis, especially when considering Singapore-origin fuel imports and exports destined to pass through the Malacca Strait.

Another threat is political and strategic coercion. The combination of economic dependence, disinformation, political influence operations and the shadow of military power creates conditions in which Beijing may seek to deter New Zealand from taking decisions that it views as hostile, such as hosting allied assets or supporting sanctions. Steff suggests even “small adjustments” in New Zealand’s relations with either side of the Sino-American rivalry can “invite a negative response” given the asymmetry in power.⁵³ In such an environment, the very existence of a powerful, outward-projecting PLA could have a chilling effect on New Zealand policy, even if Chinese forces never come close to New Zealand shores. Though the Government used Task Force 107’s Tasman-Sea transit to accrue greater public support for defence investment, such investment seems less effective if China restricts New Zealand trade or stresses New Zealand energy imports.

At the same time, it is important not to overstate Chinese intent. There is little evidence Beijing seeks territorial control in the South Pacific or direct military confrontation with New Zealand. China’s regional military engagement has included humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and participation in multilateral exercises, which can generate public support (especially among human-security-focused Pacific-Islands citizens) as well as risks. New Zealand’s own history of defence engagement with the PLA, including past training activities and humanitarian operations, reminds us relationships are multidimensional. The threat is dynamic and contingent, not fixed and inevitable.

Conclusion

The People’s Liberation Army does not currently pose a direct-invasion threat to New Zealand. Aotearoa is not Taiwan, nor is it a major frontline American ally, like Japan or the Republic of Korea. Yet it would be a serious mistake to conclude that distance insulates Wellington from Chinese military power. The transformation of Chinese strategy towards frontier defence and ‘dissipative warfare,’ the build-up of joint maritime and air capabilities, and the rapid expansion of remote sensing and other enabling systems are reshaping the Indo-Pacific security environment in which New Zealand operates, trades, and prospers.

The dataset compiled for this research on Chinese military activity across the wider Indo-Pacific, combined with recent scholarship by Ji, Steff, Wang, and others, point to a PLA that is more active, more outward-facing, and more capable of monitoring and threatening the West's and likeminded nations' operations at range.⁵⁴ The main focus of Chinese planning remains a potential high-end conflict in the Western Pacific, but the South Pacific is increasingly relevant as a 'disruption zone,' where alliances might mobilise, where sea lines of communication must be protected, and where external powers might seek access. Fortunately, the New Zealand Government has partly identified this suggesting that in the event of war in the Pacific, New Zealand must focus on protecting its immediate region, shipping, and aerial/undersea lines of communications; and contributing to coalition operations.⁵⁵ Credible contributions to New Zealand's international commitments should not mean outsourcing its defence. Rather those credible contributions should be a layer of security supplementing other overlapping layers, such as a sovereign space capability, ideally a larger sovereign merchant navy, sensors arrayed across the domains, and the ability to apply force.

The threat to New Zealand is therefore threefold. It risks the threat of entanglement in a devastating major-power war that would directly affect New Zealand's security and prosperity. There is the threat of coercive pressure on New Zealand's infrastructure, officials, citizens, and policy choices, backed by the PLA's ability to see and strike across the region. And there is the longer-term threat of an Indo-Pacific order in which China's military presence and influence narrow the room for all small states to exercise independent agency.

Chinese military doctrine and policies show that as the PLA-N becomes more capable, China is more likely to contest sea control and project power across significant distances to advance its interests through territory seizure, disruption operations, or coercion and implication.⁵⁶ New Zealand's response must be to match the nature of these threats. It requires investments in domain awareness, infrastructure, national resilience, and niche military capabilities; deeper cooperation with allies and Pacific partners; and a clearer domestic consensus about the risks and trade-offs involved in navigating the Sino-American rivalry. Above all it requires a sober appreciation that, as former Minister of Defence Andrew Little put it, New Zealand must engage with "the world as it is, not how we would like it to be."⁵⁷ That world now includes the PLA's growing reach into New Zealand's immediate region and along vital trade routes. New Zealand's strategic approach must not be panicking in the face of that reality, but proactively shaping it in ways that preserve autonomy, security, and order.

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