



# fOCUS

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA



PP5054/11/2012 (031098)  
01/2026 ISSUE NO. 25

## Building bridges: the AANZ partnership

---

**Could ASEAN's  
limitations become  
its greatest asset?**

---

**Celebrating and  
strengthening  
ASEAN-New Zealand  
Dialogue Partnership**

---

**Partners in crime?  
Cooperation against  
transnational  
organised crime in  
ASEAN**

# New Zealand and the emerging multiplex order in the Indo-Pacific

Amid a shifting world order, New Zealand draws on flexible coalitions and its layered national identity to foster an open, inclusive and globally linked Indo-Pacific

---

Dr Manjeet S Pardesi



The passing of the US-led liberal international order has shifted the locus of global-order-making to regions. Among these, the so-called Indo-Pacific – linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans – has become central to the strategic lexicon of policymakers, analysts and scholars alike. Aotearoa New Zealand, however, was initially hesitant to embrace this concept. Unlike Southeast Asia, which lies at the geographic core of the Indo-Pacific and hosts the vital sea routes that connect the two oceans, New Zealand does not border the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, given Wellington’s long-standing commitment to a regional strategic architecture anchored in ASEAN, i.e., “ASEAN Centrality”, New Zealand began to actively adopt the Indo-Pacific framework following the release of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019. New Zealand’s 2023 Defence Policy and Strategy Statement outlines three overlapping circles that define its strategic geography: the Pacific, encompassing the South-West Pacific; New Zealand’s region, including the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand (and its Antarctic territories); and the wider Indo-Pacific region. This layered approach reflects both geography and diplomacy, situating New Zealand as a bridge between multiple strategic spheres.



**Furthermore, New Zealand envisions “several centres of power and influence”, including not only China and India but also Southeast Asia, whose institutions provide the scaffolding for regional cooperation.**

## **From unipolarity to multiplex order**

New Zealand’s understanding of the Indo-Pacific is shaped by three broader transformations in the global order. The first is the movement away from the US-led post-Cold War unipolar order. Yet Wellington’s interpretation of this trend is more nuanced because the United States will continue to remain important even as other great powers rise through the international order. Furthermore, New Zealand envisions “[several centres of power and influence](#)”, including not only China and India but also Southeast Asia, whose institutions provide the scaffolding for regional cooperation. This vision resonates with the international relations scholar Amitav Acharya’s notion of a *multiplex world*—a world characterised not merely by multipolarity or multiple great powers but by multiple forms of order and agency, where smaller and middle powers also shape outcomes.

The second trend concerns the strain on multilateralism. The rise of populism and growing distrust of institutions in established Western democracies, as well as the emergence of multiple centres of power and authority, have weakened global cooperation. New Zealand has therefore emerged as a consistent advocate of multilateral reform, urging that institutions evolve to reflect “[current political and economic realities](#)”. For Wellington, renewed multilateralism is essential to address pressing global issues, such as trade governance, climate change, and technological regulation.

The third trend lies in the recognition that the world cannot be divided along ideological lines. While New Zealand rightly takes pride in its democratic political system, it has been careful not to frame world politics as a binary contest between democracy and autocracy. Wellington upgraded its Free Trade Agreement with China in 2022 and elevated its relationship with Viet Nam to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2025. Notably, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern also [did not frame](#) Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine as democracy vs. autocracy.

### Three-part role for New Zealand in the Indo-Pacific

Against this shifting backdrop, New Zealand is striving to play three key roles in the Indo-Pacific. The first is a belief in collective agency among small and middle powers. The weakening of traditional multilateralism has prompted New Zealand to deepen collaboration within progressive, flexible groupings of like-minded states. This tradition runs deep: the P4 Agreement between Brunei, Chile, Singapore and New Zealand laid the foundation for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which later evolved into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018. New Zealand has since continued to innovate, partnering with Singapore and Chile on the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement to set regional standards for digital trade. These initiatives reveal that small and middle powers are not passive recipients of order but active participants in shaping it.

The second role is New Zealand's desire to keep the Indo-Pacific connected to other regions rather than enclosed within a single great-power sphere. Wellington understands that security and economic developments in the Indo-Pacific reverberate globally (and vice versa). North Korea's involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine, for example, has underscored the interconnectedness of security theatres, prompting New Zealand to engage closely with its Indo-Pacific Four partners – Australia, Japan and South Korea. Similarly, in trade policies, New Zealand advocates strengthening ties between the CPTPP and the European Union to ensure that regional integration does not devolve into global fragmentation. By positioning itself as a connector state, New Zealand contributes to an inter-regional world order that remains “open” and globally linked.

The third role – and perhaps the most distinctive – is New Zealand's prioritisation of the Pacific. Within the broader Indo-Pacific construct, the Pacific region remains

the heart of Wellington's strategic and moral commitments. New Zealand seeks to amplify Pacific voices, recognising that while these states are small in landmass and population, they are large maritime nations with long histories and deep-rooted cultures. In addition, New Zealand aims to shape how external powers engage with this strategically vital region. While most Indo-Pacific debates fixate on major power rivalries, the Pacific's most urgent challenges are different: rising sea levels, climate change, sustainable economic development and transnational crime. Addressing these issues is not only a question of policy but of justice and morality.

### Identity at the heart of strategy

Ultimately, New Zealand's approach to the Indo-Pacific is inseparable from its national identity. The country is both Western and Pacific – a bicultural polity grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi. Furthermore, New Zealand is increasingly multicultural in composition, with a rapidly growing population of Asian descent. This layered identity informs a foreign policy ethos that seeks to bridge divides, respect differences and uphold the *mana* – the dignity and authority – of all partners. Such an approach embodies *whanaungatanga*, the Māori principle of reciprocal relationships built on mutual respect and shared purpose.

In a world defined by contested norms and shifting hierarchies, New Zealand's approach offers a quiet but powerful model of constructive agency.



**Dr Manjeet S Pardesi**

Associate Professor  
School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and  
International Relations  
Victoria University of Wellington  
New Zealand