

**Declaration on Defence and Security between the
Government of New Zealand and the Government of the Cook Islands
2026**

The Government of New Zealand (“New Zealand”) and the Government of the Cook Islands (“the Cook Islands”) (together, “the Partners”):

RECALLING their enduring constitutional relationship established in 1965, under which the Cook Islands is self-governing in free association with New Zealand, grounded in partnership, mutual respect, and shared values, and recognising both states’ place within the Realm of New Zealand (the Realm);

ACKNOWLEDGING the shared history, enduring kinship ties, interconnected interests and close people to people connections, including the status of Cook Islanders as New Zealand citizens, which is founded on the upholding of mutually accepted shared values in Cook Islands laws and policies;

AFFIRMING the strength and enduring nature of their special constitutional relationship, despite an increasingly complex and contested global and regional security environment characterised by geopolitical competition, disruption, and significant environmental challenges affecting the Pacific region and the Realm;

RECOGNISING that their vital interests are interconnected, that the Sovereign in right of New Zealand must hold a unity of interests across the Realm, and that security risks to the Cook Islands directly affect the security and integrity of the Realm;

REAFFIRMING New Zealand’s constitutional responsibility for the defence and security of the Cook Islands;

AFFIRMING the evolution of the Cook Islands’ international identity, including in support of its economic diversification strategy; and

DETERMINED to deepen practical cooperation and strengthen alignment in defence and security to enhance the safety, prosperity, and protection of their peoples, and the strength of their relationship;

JOINTLY DECLARE:

Constitutional Relationship

1. The relationship of free association between New Zealand and the Cook Islands is a voluntary relationship of mutual consent, freely entered into and dependent on shared interests and values. It is maintained on the basis of reciprocal trust and respect.
2. It is underpinned by the shared Sovereign in right of New Zealand; and the extension of New Zealand citizenship to the people of the Cook Islands and the corresponding commitment by the Cook Islands to uphold the fundamental values upon which that citizenship is based.
3. The Cook Islands Constitution Act 1964 states: “Nothing in this Act or Constitution shall affect the responsibilities of Her Majesty the Queen in right of New Zealand for the external affairs and defence of the Cook Islands, those responsibilities to be discharged after consultation” between the Prime Ministers of New Zealand and the Cook Islands.
4. The Cook Islands and New Zealand’s partnership, established in the Cook Islands Constitution Act 1964, has evolved through the Kirk-Henry Exchange of Letters 1973, the Letters Patent of 1983 and the Joint Centenary Declaration 2001.
5. Consistent with paragraph 4 and the Cook Islands Constitution, the Cook Islands has control over its internal affairs and an international legal personality, under which it pursues its own foreign policy and diplomatic relationships, subject to the constitutional limits of free association.
6. The defence and security of each of the Partners is a shared concern and is inter-dependent with the defence and security of the Realm. The Partners remain committed to upholding the collective and interconnected defence and security interests of the Cook Islands, New Zealand, and the Realm as a whole.

Deepened Cooperation

7. New Zealand is committed to remaining the primary defence and security partner of the Cook Islands and will continue to support the Cook Islands in defence and security capacity and capability, including in, but not limited to, the areas of national security, policing, cyber security, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.
8. The New Zealand Defence Force will continue to have responsibilities for the defence of the Cook Islands, in accordance with the Cook Islands

Constitution Act 1964. In keeping with those responsibilities, New Zealand commits to an uplift in Defence engagement with the Cook Islands.

9. The Cook Islands exercises executive authority over its exclusive economic zone, land territory and airspace. In keeping with the spirit of partnership and constitutional responsibility, the Cook Islands will continue to work in partnership with New Zealand, including through permitting the New Zealand Defence Force access to these areas to fulfil defence mandates and uphold shared security commitments.

Communication and Consultation

10. The relationship of free association is a partnership founded on trust and open communication. The Partners will consult on defence and security matters in good faith to support the effective exercise of their respective constitutional responsibilities.
11. The Partners acknowledge that consultation means timely, transparent, and good-faith engagement on matters of defence and security that may affect the interests of either Partner or the security of the Realm of New Zealand. In this context:
 - a. The Cook Islands will provide early and comprehensive notification of any prospective matter that either Partner judges could have implications for New Zealand's constitutional responsibilities for the defence and security of the Realm, to enable meaningful discussion and consideration of New Zealand's views.
 - b. New Zealand will inform the Cook Islands of defence or security matters that may materially affect the Cook Islands' interests, with a view to maintaining transparency and collective security.
 - c. Both Partners will ensure that such engagements are consistent with their collective security interests and New Zealand's constitutional responsibilities.
12. Regular, structured dialogue will be maintained between officials and Ministers to ensure alignment of fundamental interests and to address any differences.

13. Where one Partner requests information on a matter of defence or security from the other, that information will be shared to the fullest extent possible, and within a timeframe commensurate with the nature of the information, the situation and objective of the request.

Third Parties

14. The Cook Islands affirms that New Zealand is its partner of choice regarding defence and security matters. As such, the Cook Islands will engage New Zealand in the first instance for any requests for support in its defence and security including but not limited to maritime security, defence, policing assistance and training, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and training, border protection and cyber security sectors, critical infrastructure concerning ports and airports, banking, energy and telecommunications, including satellites and internet connectivity.

15. The Partners will not enter into activities, agreements, or arrangements with third parties that would compromise their ability to uphold the principles and meet the commitments set out in this Declaration. This reflects their shared interest in maintaining the integrity and security of the Realm and underscores the importance of mutual respect and cooperation.

Signed in Rarotonga on the 1st day of April 2026

**On behalf of the
Government of New Zealand**

**On behalf of the
Government of Cook Islands**

**Rt. Hon. Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs**

**Hon. Mark Brown
Prime Minister**