



Terry Johanson

MMAS, MA, Centre for Defence and Security Studies, Massey University, New Zealand
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8724-6059>

Differing concepts of total defence in small states: comparing the cases of New Zealand and Poland

Introduction

Ieva Bērziņa proposes that the meaning of the concept total defence has changed its focus since the end of the Cold War. Within the context of the Cold War, the total defence concept centred specifically on territorial defence with standing military forces largely defensive in nature and was reliant upon the rapid mobilisation of civil society into armed resistance forces.¹ She asserts that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the term *total* or *comprehensive defence* describes the broader focus of military forces in response to the diminished likelihood of interstate conventional warfare and the blurring of the boundaries between civilian and military contributions to state defence. However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates the continued need for states to be resilient in the face of external aggression. The conflict also demonstrates the necessity for a smaller power to be able to orchestrate a whole-of-society approach in defending the sovereignty of their state from a direct military threat. The problem highlighted by the situation between Russia and the Baltic states is that within the contemporary defence environment both definitions of total defence presented above remain equally valid. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate that small states' application

¹ I. Bērziņa, "From 'total' to 'comprehensive' national defence: the development of the concept in Europe", *Journal on Baltic Security*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 7–15.

of the total defence concept can differ depending upon the context of their strategic environment, and that both approaches are equally effective when aligned to the state's specific security demands. Understanding the fluid nature of the total defence concept is important for small states in focusing their defence policies on the specific context and security risks of their strategic environment in order to optimise the capabilities and response options for their military forces. To examine this proposition, a comparison between the Polish Ministry of National Defence's 2017 *Koncepcja Obronna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej / The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland* and New Zealand Ministry of Defence's *Defence Assessment 2021: He Moana Pukepuke e Ekengia e te Waka / A Rough Sea Can Still Be Navigated* publications will demonstrate that small state approaches to the total defence concept are largely influenced by the context of their strategic environment.²

For the purposes of this article, a state is defined as small if they are unable to significantly change the nature and/or structure of their immediate strategic environment.³ Under this definition, small states are the weaker side of their relationship with a dominant regional actor, or actors. For example, Poland must navigate relationships with both the Russian Federation and NATO, and New Zealand must balance between the US (its largest defence partner) and China (their largest trade partner).⁴ Despite their common position as small states, Poland and New Zealand have quite different approaches in their defence policies due to the distinct defence challenges of their strategic environments.

A qualitative document analysis of Poland's and New Zealand's most recent defence policy publications was used to make sense of each country's defence approach. The analysis applied an inductive approach to compare and contrast the total defence concept adopted by each state. Both documents describe the nature and challenges of their strategic environment and the expectations of their military forces in supporting national security operations. The document analysis sought to explore four main questions:

² [Poland] Ministry of National Defence, *Koncepcja Obronna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej / The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, 2017, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/78e14510-253a-4b48-bc31-fd11db898ab7>; New Zealand Ministry of Defence, *Defence Assessment 2021: He Moana Pukepuke e Ekengia e te Waka / A Rough Sea Can Still Be Navigated*, 2021, <https://www.defence.govt.nz/assets/publication/file/Defence-Assessment-2021.pdf> [accessed: 18 March 2022].

³ T. Long, "Small states, great power? Gaining influence through intrinsic, derivative, and collective power", *International Studies Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2017, pp. 185–205.; M. Maass, *Small States in World Politics: The Story of Small State Survival, 1648–2016*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.

⁴ T. McClure, "A matter of time': New Zealand's foreign minister warn China 'storm' could be coming", *The Guardian*, 24 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/25/a-matter-of-time-new-zealands-foreign-minister-warns-china-storm-could-be-coming> [accessed: 18 March 2022].

1. How does each state perceive and describe their strategic environment?
2. What threats and challenges does each country identify to determine the likely tasks for military contributions to national security operations?
3. What are the linkages between the challenges identified above and the directed tasks for military contributions to national security operations?
4. Do the proposed changes to military capabilities and structures align with anticipated changes in their strategic environment?

Total, territorial, and comprehensive defence

Ieva Bērziņa shows that the concept of total defence has its origins in the experiences of *total war* during the Second World War. During the second global conflict, warfare was no longer conducted separately from civilian populations and all segments of society were affected regardless of their proximity to major combat.⁵ Erich Ludendorff proposed that the essence of *total war* was that the armed forces and civilian population operated as one because the entire territory of the warring states was encompassed in the theatre of military operations.⁶ Thus, the concepts of *total war* and total defence were largely the same and required states to be able to respond to military threats to their national interests, both at home and abroad.

In the bipolar international environment of the Cold War, total defence was used by small, non-aligned states, such as Switzerland or Finland, to maintain neutrality and avoid being drawn into the broader global conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.⁷ Through non-alignment, these states avoided collective security options and were self-sufficient in their defence. This approach was a deterrence strategy whereby the small state aimed to present a cost of aggression by potential adversaries that was much greater than any benefits that could be gained. This total defence approach centred on focussing specifically on territorial defence. The standing military forces' capabilities, planning, and training under this strategy were defensive in nature and relied upon the rapid mobilisation of civil society into armed resistance forces.⁸ Compulsory military service was a key component of total defence to ensure all citizens had a basic level of military training that could be augmented upon mobilisation in the face of a threat to the state.⁹

⁵ I. Bērziņa, "From 'total' to 'comprehensive' national defence...", p. 7.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Eadem, Total defence as a comprehensive approach to national security, [in:] *Deterring Russia in Europe: defence strategies for neighbouring states*, eds. N. Vanaga, T. Rostoks, New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 71–89.

The 2022 Ukrainian defence against the Russian invasion is a clear example of this approach.¹⁰ However, the 21st century has seen the term of total defence be used to describe a very different concept.

The name *total* or *comprehensive defence* is now being used to describe a collective defence concept emphasising civil contributions to national security and societal resilience within states.¹¹ NATO identifies “civil preparedness” as a foundation of resilience and a critical component of collective defence.¹² The changes in the concept of total defence are largely due to the greater connectivity and complexity of the contemporary international system. The emergence of hybrid threats, both military and non-military, and the increasing importance of how information is perceived, have broadened the dimensions through which a state’s security can be undermined. The increased risk space has created demands on military forces in areas outside of their traditional sphere of operations which, in turn, necessitates the development of new capabilities and skillsets. The expansion of the military role presents a challenge for small states, already resource-constrained by virtue of their limited human and financial capital. In the past, a small state could choose to remain neutral, and thereby focus its resources on territorial defence; however, as Rickli suggests, in the post-Cold War period this approach is viewed as security “free riding” by active members of the global community.¹³ The questions raised by this dilemma are: what options do small states have for achieving total defence in the contemporary international system, and is the total defence concept perceived the same by small states in the contemporary defence environment?

Poland’s Defence Concept

The 2017 Polish Ministry of National Defence’s *Koncepcja Obronna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej / The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland* document identifies

¹⁰ J. Aliyev, T Yavuz, “Ukraine’s ‘territorial defense’ trains civilians against possible hitches amid tensions”, Anadolu Agency, 6 February 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/ukraines-territorial-defense-trains-civilians-against-possible-hitches-amid-tensions/2495184#> [accessed: 22 February 2022]; S.J. Flanagan, M. Kepe, “What kind of resistance can Ukraine mount?”, DefenseNews, 27 February 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/02/26/what-kind-of-resistance-can-ukraine-mount/> [accessed: 4 March 2022]; O. Bizot, “Thousands of Ukrainians sign up to fight for their country as Russian invasion continues”, The Observers, 25 February 2022, <https://observers.france24.com/en/europe/20220225-thousands-of-ukrainians-sign-up-to-fight-for-their-country-as-russia-invasion-continues> [accessed: 4 March 2022].

¹¹ I. Bērziņa, “From ‘total’ to ‘comprehensive’ national defence...”, p. 12.

¹² J. Shea, “Resilience: a core element of collective defence”, NATO Review, 30 March 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/03/30/resilience-a-core-element-of-collective-defence/index.html> [accessed: 4 March 2022].

¹³ J.-M. Rickli, “European small states’ military policies after the Cold War: from territorial to niche strategies”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2008, pp. 307–325

“[...] the necessity of adequately preparing Poland to defend its own territory [...]” as the “number one priority” for Polish defence policy.¹⁴ Poland’s prioritisation of territorial defence is reflective of the key threats and challenges present in their immediate strategic environment. The defence concept presents Poland’s main defence challenges in an order that may be interpreted as a priority of importance. They are:

- Aggressive Policy of the Russian Federation,
- Unstable Neighbourhood on NATO’s Eastern Flank,
- Unstable Neighbourhood of Southern Flank,
- Terrorism,
- Evolution of the Western Integration Structures,
- Economic and Social Environment, and
- Technological Progress and the Future Battlespace.¹⁵

The first three items are clear and present threats to Poland’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and given Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, appear well founded and require immediate attention. Russia’s aggressive policy has manifested into violent conflict, and Poland’s concerns about Ukraine’s vulnerability to attack and Belarus’ subservience to Moscow have proven correct.¹⁶ In addition, the instability of their Southern Flank, encompassing the Middle East and North Africa, leads Polish defence planners to continue to contribute to international collective security operations to prevent escalation in these areas.¹⁷ The nature of the threats and challenges presented in the Defence Concept document become less specific as the list progresses down. This generality of issues is indicative of the origins and complexity of these challenges and Poland’s ability to directly impact its root cause and effects. Therefore, Poland’s prioritisation of territorial defence, despite being the smaller partner in an adversarial relationship with the Russian Federation, is entirely rational, given the threat-based context of their strategic environment. Under this context, Poland has chosen to focus its resources on protecting its territory and sovereignty and has adopted a deterrence approach consistent with the traditional concept of total defence. New Zealand, however, envisions a different approach in its defence assessment of their strategic environment.

¹⁴ [Poland] Ministry of National Defence, *Koncepcja Obronna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej / The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 23–35.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*; P. Tchoubar, P. Young, O. Bizot, A. Bamas, “Ukraine residents recount Russian attacks: ‘We realised we had nowhere to go’”, *The Observers*, 24 February 2022, <https://observers.france24.com/en/europe/20220224-ukraine-russia-crisis-invasion-residents-recount-evacuation-shellings> [accessed: 18 March 2022]; M. Mirovalev, “Ukraine crisis: What does Belarus have to gain, and lose?”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/23/what-is-the-role-of-belarus-in-the-ukraine-russia-crisis> [accessed: 18 March 2022].

¹⁷ [Poland] Ministry of National Defence, *Koncepcja Obronna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej / The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, pp. 23–35

New Zealand's Defence Assessment

The New Zealand Government's Ministry of Defence states that the "[...] fundamental role of New Zealand Defence is the generation and application of military capabilities to defence New Zealand and advance its national security interests."¹⁸ The *Defence Assessment 2021: He Moana Pukepuke e Ekengia e te Waka / A Rough Sea Can Still Be Navigated* document presents that "[...] New Zealand does not yet face a direct military threat to the territory of New Zealand itself [...]" and that in the event of such a threat emerging, "New Zealand would very likely require substantial assistance from partner nations [...]"¹⁹ For New Zealand's Ministry of Defence this means that "[...] the independent territorial defence of New Zealand should not therefore be the principal driver for New Zealand's defence policy."²⁰ Given New Zealand's available human and financial resources and its inability to rapidly increase its military power to independently defeat external military aggression, this conclusion appears logical. Unlike Poland, the most important challenges to New Zealand's national security come from outside of its immediate proximity, so it is the impacts of these challenges that its defence policy seeks to mitigate. New Zealand's Defence Assessment identifies "strategic competition" and the "impacts of climate change" as the two principal challenges to New Zealand's defence interests.²¹ The defence interests identified in the New Zealand Defence Assessment are:

- a secure, sovereign, and resilient New Zealand;
- a stable and secure region in which New Zealand has the freedom to act in support of shared interests and values;
- a strong international rules-based system, centred on multilateralism and liberal democratic values; and
- a strong network of international security relationships, partnerships, and alliances.²²

New Zealand's interests are not presented in the order of importance, suggested by the quotation above, but appear categorised by geographical theatre.

The New Zealand Defence Assessment considers "promoting and protecting New Zealand's interests in the Pacific" as the "highest priority for New Zealand's defence policy."²³ This Pacific focus may be due to New Zealand's assessment that the most significant threats to its national security may arise from regional instability. Currently, New Zealand supports Pacific security by responding to:

¹⁸ New Zealand Ministry of Defence, *Defence Assessment 2021: He Moana Pukepuke e Ekengia e te Waka / A Rough Sea Can Still Be Navigated*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 10–12.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

- the increasing impacts of climate change leading to increased demands in preparing for and responding to natural disasters,
- COVID-19 disruption of industries Pacific states rely on for economic wellbeing,
- exacerbation of existing and emerging stresses due to impacts of COVID-19 and climate change, and
- challenges to Pacific regional security architecture by external actors.²⁴

However, New Zealand proposes that increased strategic competition could drive dramatic changes in the Pacific security environment.²⁵ The potential developments identified in their defence assessment as most threatening are:

- establishment of a military base or dual-use facility in the Pacific by a state that does not share New Zealand's values and security interests,
- extra-regional military-backed resource exploitation,
- military confrontation, and
- contested responses to security events.²⁶

These developments are viewed as more important to New Zealand's national security as any direct military threat to its territory is likely to "[...] come from or through [...]" the Pacific, less those originating from cyber and outer space.²⁷ China, the US, and Russia are identified as the major actors increasing strategic competition in the Pacific region.²⁸ The New Zealand defence assessment suggests that these large powers will pursue this competition in the "grey zone" below the threshold of armed conflict and use activities designed to exploit uncertainty and influence perceptions to support their objectives.²⁹ The conclusions from the New Zealand Defence Assessment, presented above, reinforce the limited military threat to New Zealand's national security and the security of the Pacific. However, the impacts of climate change will require New Zealand defence contributions to prevent destabilisation of Pacific Island governance and economic structures in the wake of natural disasters, and to mitigate against negative influences of increased strategic competition in the Pacific region. Contributions to impacts of climate change will be the most likely use of New Zealand defence forces in its strategic environment, whereas the appearance of military conflict in the region is certainly the most dangerous to New Zealand's defence approach. The approach proposed by New Zealand's defence assessment can be described as more of a forward defence strategy whereby it seeks to prevent potential security issues and threats manifesting in its immediate strategic environment. By focussing on supporting the Pacific Island states in maintaining political and economic stability in the face of challenges from

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 16

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

climate change, natural disasters, or external influence and actively contributing to broader global security operations, New Zealand defence forces act when issues are within their capacity to respond effectively.

The articulation of New Zealand's defence interests is less specific than the threats and challenges presented in the Polish defence concept. These differences in describing defence interests are reflective of the contrasting strategic contexts of these states and indicate the rationale for their dissimilar defence policy approaches. Poland's defence concept is consistent with the Cold War application of the total defence model.³⁰ Adopting this threat-based approach is in response to the presence of the aggressive Russia in their immediate strategic environment, and instability emanating from the neighbouring former Soviet states, the Middle East, and North Africa. In the absence of an existential military threat and greater potential risk from non-traditional defence issues, New Zealand's defence policy, however, aligns more with the risk management approach of the concept of *comprehensive defence*.³¹ New Zealand's greatest security risks come from outside their immediate territory, therefore, they take actions at the global and regional levels across a broader range of issues to prevent them from developing beyond their defence force's ability to resolve.

Small state defence options

As indicated above, Poland and New Zealand can be identified as small states within their strategic environment. It can also be concluded that the different natures of their respective strategic contexts have a major influence on the defence policies these actors have chosen. When an actor has little ability to change the nature and structure of their environment, they must identify options for successfully achieving their objectives within the parameters of the current environment. The two options are proposed here for small state defence planning, which have been adopted from Hannan and Freeman's theory of the Population Ecology of Organisations. This theory asserts that organisations within a system will act in one of two ways.³² The first approach is for an organisation to seek to respond adequately to every potential contingency anticipated to occur due to changes in the system's dynamics. This approach is identified as the "adaptation perspective" and is consistent with the current methodology for defence planning in most states.³³ The alterna-

³⁰ I. Bērziņa, "From 'total' to 'comprehensive' national defence...", p. 8.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

³² M.T. Hannan, J. Freeman, "The Population Ecology of Organisations", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 5, 1977, p. 929.

³³ *Ibidem*; T. Farrell, *The norms of war: cultural beliefs and modern conflict*, Boulder, CO: L. Rienner Publishers, 2005, pp. 37–39.

tive option is “selection” where an organisation develops expertise in a narrow band of contingencies that most directly impact their position within the system. These “specialist” organisations will “select” a relevant niche within a system and focus their resources on being highly proficient in this area.³⁴ Selection of a specialised niche is seen by these organisations as a means for increasing their importance to more influential actors, thereby strengthening their position within the system and mitigating vulnerabilities of size.³⁵

Within the context of the post-Cold War international environment, this means that states can choose to either maintain an adaptive approach to defence planning and develop capabilities able to conduct all mission types across the spectrum of conflict, or select a specialist niche based upon the operational contingencies that most directly impact their national security. For large influential states, such as the US, China and the Russian Federation, an adaptive strategy may be necessary due to their strategic ambition and global span of interest. Resource availability in these large powers affords them the luxury of incorporating new capabilities and specialisations, such as cyber and information warfare, into their existing military architecture. Additionally, small states which perceive the presence of an existential military threat, such as Singapore or Israel, may dedicate significant resources towards the development of military organisations able to defend their territory and sovereignty from external aggression, and this decision will be largely supported by their civil populations.³⁶ The threat-based context of Poland’s strategic environment necessitates the state maintains military capabilities able to respond to issues across the spectrum of conflict. Poland requires forces not only sufficient to deter external aggression from Russia, but also conduct operations in response to emerging non-traditional threats. Therefore, a generalist approach is the appropriate one, given Poland’s strategic environment.

For small states that lack a clear military threat to their sovereignty, however, more evident social issues may be prioritised higher than defence expenditure by their government and public.³⁷ Spreading their limited resources across multiple military response options may lead to diminished effectiveness across all capabilities, therefore, focussing on a narrower band of core operations may better serve the defence interests of these states. The New Zealand defence assessment acknowledges the lack of a direct military threat to its sovereignty and territory, and its focus towards Pacific Island security may indicate the desire to apply a specialist defence model.

³⁴ M.T. Hannan, J. Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 948.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ J.K. Wither, “Back to the future? Nordic total defence concepts”, *Defence Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2020, p. 62.

³⁷ T. Edmunds, “The defence dilemma in Britain”, *International Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 2, 2010, pp. 377–394.

Conclusion

The comparison between the defence approaches of Poland and New Zealand demonstrates the post-Cold War period has a place for different perceptions of total defence. The traditional Cold War concept of territorial defence enabled through deterrence and mass mobilisation of civil society in response to external aggression has been validated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the threat-based nature of Poland's strategic environment. However, the *comprehensive defence* approach articulated in New Zealand's defence assessment, which focuses on military contributions in support of non-traditional defence roles and missions, is equally valid, given a strategic environment absent of a direct military threat. Moreover, New Zealand's greatest defence challenges originate from the impacts of climate change and the strategic competition between external actors. Therefore, it follows that the concept of total defence, like many relating to the military profession, should be understood relative to the context in which it is being applied.

At the base level, the difference between the two small state approaches to total defence discussed here, is a reflection of the security contexts in which these states exist. In a threat-based context, such as Poland's, the primary responsibility for defeating an identifiable threat of external aggression is, naturally, the military and they are supported by civil society in this role. Conversely, in the absence of a direct military threat, a state's military capabilities are subordinated to other government agencies who lead the responses to non-traditional security threats such as humanitarian crises, natural disasters, and resource depletion. For small states, in particular, closely aligning their defence approach with the specific challenges of their strategic environment enables greater effectiveness in resource apportionment which, in turn, more directly meets the defence interests of their people. Therefore, total defence will mean different things in different circumstances, any attempt at a fixed definition of this concept implies that all state defence contexts are the same and disregard the everchanging character of military operations and the societies, forces, and governments that influence them.

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Differing concepts of total defence in small states: comparing the cases of New Zealand and Poland

Abstract

This article proposes that a small state's approach to total defence will be strongly influenced by the nature of its strategic environment. It compares the defence approaches of Poland and New Zealand to identify whether the different contexts of their strategic environments necessitate divergent strategies for defending their state. The theory of population ecology of organisations will be used to frame the different options available to small states in their strategic environments and applied to the cases in order to explain their different approaches to total defence.

Key words: total defence, New Zealand Defence Assessment, defence policy

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Johanson, T

2022

<http://hdl.handle.net/10179/17767>

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