

In Defence of the Planet

Think Piece 42: March 2025



Prime Minister Narendra Modi
74 years old



President Xi Jinping
71 years old



President Donald Trump
78 years old



President Vladimir Putin
72 years old

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This Think Piece explores several topics that may seem disconnected, but are not. These topics are: land wars over territory, mineral wars, tariff wars, climate change, and the leaders of the four most powerful countries on the planet. The topics are looked at individually, before exploring the interconnections and their implications.

The news is filled with wars right now: mineral wars, tariff wars, wars over territory. However, the one war that is failing to capture much media attention is likely to be our deadliest: the war on climate change. There is no point in fighting each other if we do not have a healthy planet.

The reason our war on climate change is failing to get much attention is that climate change is sneaking up on us insidiously, and it cannot be solved through a negotiation (such as a peace agreement between a few parties); it requires *all* countries to agree a strategy and then execute it. As societies fight each other, and fight internally, we lose focus on what we need to do together. Of concern is that the kinds of wars we are hearing about also amplify and accelerate the impacts of climate change.

Wars for land and resources increase emissions in many ways. As well as the human cost of warfare, there is a climate cost. War is a major source of emissions. Among the many causes are manufacture of carbon-intensive explosives and fortifications; heavy fuel consumption; ignition of landscape fires which may burn uncontrolled; and the reconstruction process. Hence, increasing defence budgets has the potential to accelerate climate change.¹

The desire for minerals, and to prevent other major powers from owning and controlling them, can lead to wars for territory. This is considered by some to have led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It is thought that 5% of the world's critical raw materials are in the Ukraine.² Also keen to acquire Ukraine's mineral resources is the USA. It wants to reduce its dependency on China which, according to the Geological Investment Group, controls 75% of rare earth deposits in the world.³ Likewise, minerals are considered to form part of the USA's desire to 'purchase' Greenland, with President Trump saying the USA would acquire the territory 'one way or the other'.^{4,5} Closer to home, the Cook Islands has signed a five-year agreement with China to cooperate on exploring and researching the Pacific nation's seabed mineral riches.⁶

Russia, China and the USA are in a race to control the world's minerals, and depending on how and for what purposes those minerals are extracted, and who by, the results are likely to shape the world over the next 50 years or more.⁷ In particular, it matters who uses those minerals and whether they are used for the betterment of the planet and all of humankind.

President Trump has plunged the USA into a tariff war abroad. Tariffs are taxes placed on imported goods to either increase revenue and/or protect emerging industries. They are an old-fashioned tool that has led to many countries putting in place complex, reciprocal tariff systems (see Box 1: New Zealand tariff case study).

These have often escalated to tariff wars, with countries increasing tariffs in an ad-hoc, tit-for-tat manner. From one perspective, tariffs should reduce transportation costs as fewer goods are traded between countries, thereby reducing emissions. However, a February 2025 article by the *New York Times* notes 'the U.S. energy sector, including fossil fuels and renewables, is particularly vulnerable to trade disputes. Not only are oil and gas major imports and exports, but the complex supply chain needed to produce clean energy technologies is deeply reliant on global trade'. The article explores the implications if China decides not to pay the USA tariff on natural gas (the USA is currently the world's largest natural gas exporter). For example, China may replace USA gas with Russian gas – and/or with coal (a much more carbon-intensive source of energy). The article also notes that the 'effect of tariffs on oil, gas and electricity is relatively straightforward. What's harder to predict is the myriad ways that a trade war could affect the complex supply chains that make it possible for companies to produce solar panels, batteries, electric vehicles and wind turbines'.⁸

Box 1: New Zealand tariff case study

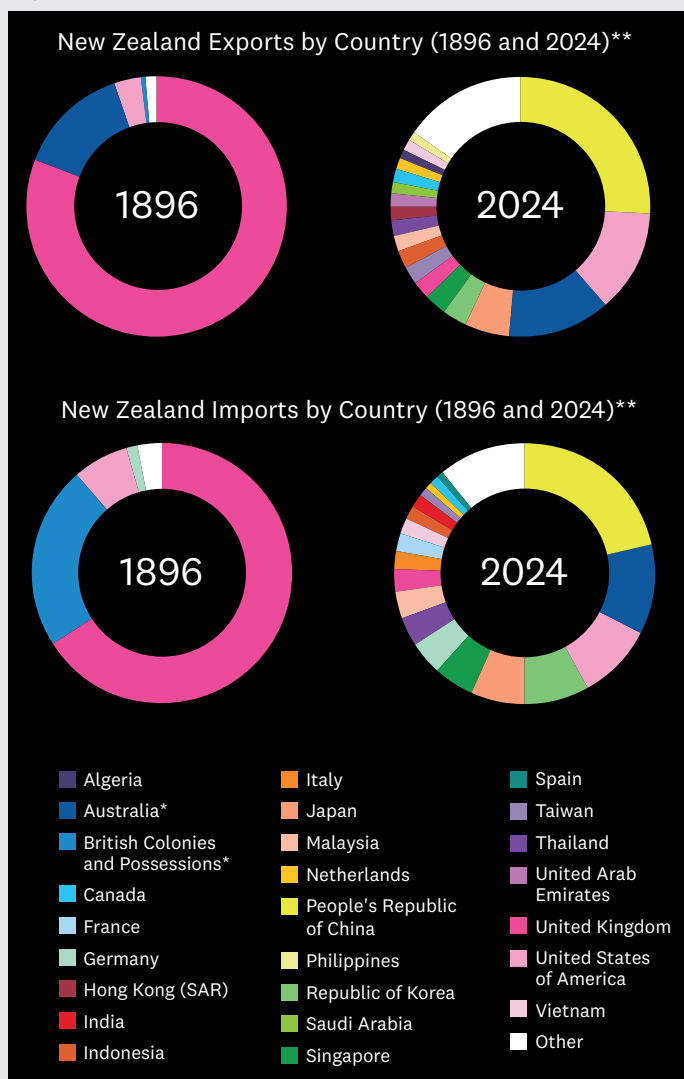
From 1840, the New Zealand government began to impose tariffs on alcohol, tobacco and other goods. Tariffs remained the largest source of tax revenue until World War I. Income taxes were only introduced in 1891.

By 1999, most tariffs had been removed. Since then, New Zealand has entered into many free trade agreements, including agreements with China (in 2008), the UK (entered into force in 2023), and the EU (entered into force in 2024).^{9,10,11,12} In 2017, Prime Minister Bill English announced the Government's ambitious goal of having free trade agreements cover 90% of New Zealand's goods exports by 2030, up from 53%.^{13,14}

In 2025, we have seen the USA revert to using tariffs, at the same time as it surpassed Australia to become New Zealand's second largest export market (see Figure 1 below). MFAT noted that in the year ending March 2024, 'New Zealand exported NZ\$14.6 billion in goods and services to the USA and imported NZ\$11.4 billion, representing a trade balance of NZ\$3.5 billion and a total trade value of NZ\$25.8 billion'.¹⁵ Unfortunately, New Zealand does not have a free trade agreement with the

USA and is therefore vulnerable to tariffs being imposed. New Zealand and the USA are part of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, but this is not a free trade agreement and does not include market access for goods or services through traditional schedules. However, MFAT notes ‘there is commercial opportunity for New Zealand in the trade pillar through the negotiation of rules on Trade Facilitation, Digital Trade, and Regulatory Cooperation among other things’.¹⁶ If the USA did put a tariff on our exports, it would have a significant negative impact on our agricultural and food industries.¹⁷ In terms of climate change, it might reduce emissions by reducing supply and transportation, but a loss of income from exports would also significantly reduce our financial ability to transition our economy to net zero.

Figure 1: New Zealand Exports and Imports by Country#



Notes:

1. Years are to 30 June. See additional notes for asterisks in endnotes.
2. The level of exposure New Zealand might face from tariffs or supply chain risks will depend on the nature of the products and services being imported or exported by country. For example, dairy products are generally exported to China and fuel is largely imported from the Republic of Korea.
3. Visuals of changes in exports and imports since 1896 can be viewed by year on the [McGuinness Institute's 'Infographics' web page](#).

Four influential leaders

Today there are four major nations whose influence on climate springs from the size of their population, their economic power and/or their military might.¹⁸ All four of their leaders are likely to stay in their positions until at least 2029 (notably, two have already extended their leadership by changing the rules).

1. Prime Minister Narendra Modi could lead India until at least 2029.¹⁹
2. President Xi Jinping could lead China for his lifetime.²⁰
3. President Donald Trump could lead the USA until 2029.²¹
4. President Vladimir Putin could lead Russia until 2036.²²

If you believe that the actions taken in the next four years are critical for maintaining a climate suitable for the future of humankind, then to some degree the future of the Earth is dependent on the leadership of these four men.

Figure 2: The four leaders in the year 2029##



Prime Minister Modi will be 78 years old and will lead a population of 1.5 billion	President Jinping will be 76 years old and will lead a population of 1.4 billion	President Trump will be 83 years old and will lead a population of 0.354 billion	President Putin will be 76 years old and will lead a population of 0.143 billion
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In 2029, the average age of these four leaders will be 78 years old. Recent actions by two of the four will speed up climate change – for example, Putin’s invasion into Ukraine and Trump’s ‘drill, baby, drill’ mantra.²³ Climate Action Tracker (CAT), an independent scientific analysis of climate pledges, finds that, in terms of meeting their 1.5% Paris Agreement goals, Russia is ‘critically insufficient’, China and India are ‘highly insufficient’ (as is New Zealand), and the USA is ‘insufficient’ (but this is based on President Biden’s policies).²⁴

CAT notes, ‘Russia’s existing policies indicate no real commitment to curb emissions’.²⁵ In contrast, it notes that China’s ‘rapid rollout of renewables and a significant reduction in new coal power projects’ suggest that the most recent emissions projections will peak before 2025.²⁶ It also notes India’s ‘substantial progress in installing renewable energy capacity and continuous decline in its tariff’, but recognises that it is ‘experiencing rapid growth in energy demand driven by GDP growth essential for a developing economy and increased demand for cooling amid heatwaves’ resulting in India’s fossil fuel demand remaining unchanged.²⁷ CAT notes: ‘An assessment of the impact of the Trump Administration will follow once information is available’.²⁸

China is arguably the only one of the four countries that is actively responding to the imminent climate disaster facing the planet, as illustrated by their recent activity in the Pacific and Africa. Unless the leaders change their policies and attitudes to climate change, either acting independently or together, the war on climate change will be a war of attrition. Their current actions and most importantly, their lack of action, will weaken our ability to curb climate change over what could be the most important window of time for the future of the world. The next four years count. Using an analogy, we are currently perched on a bridge over a ravine, and the bridge is getting weaker while the ravine is becoming a canyon.

What can we expect?

Smaller isolated countries are easy pickings for big countries. Three of the big four are wanting to reshape their boundaries. Russia is heading west by force (i.e. invading Ukraine). Some leaders are concerned this might lead to Russia invading Poland, Moldova, Romania and other countries in Europe.²⁹ China has indicated an interest in Taiwan, and possibly Mongolia and

parts of Bhutan.³⁰ However, as indicated earlier, China is also developing wider global interests in the Pacific and other areas of the globe (e.g. Africa). The USA has indicated an interest in Greenland (as discussed on p. 1), Canada,³¹ Panama³² and Mexico (recently renaming the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America).³³

While large countries remained relatively independent of each other, small nations could feel fairly secure. The previous narrative was that trade, ideally free trade, created a kind of glue that kept everything in line, with small countries sitting under the umbrella, but not inside the tent (e.g. Belarus sitting under Russia's umbrella and Australia, New Zealand and Japan sitting under the USA umbrella). The USA previously provided small democratic countries throughout the world certainty by providing insurance against a potential invasion (i.e. they would join forces to remove the invader). Political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. said recently, of President Trump, 'He is so obsessed with the problem of free riders that he forgets that it has been in America's interest to drive the bus.'³⁴ This arrangement has delivered world peace since World War II. However, in recent years, and particularly this year, the natural balance has been eroded and uncertainty prevails (see Box 2).

Box 2: Recent developments

2016

- The UK voted to leave the EU in 2016 and officially left the trading bloc on 31 January 2020.³⁵

2022

- Before dawn on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion on cities all over Ukraine – an invasion of a smaller democratic nation by its more powerful neighbour.³⁶

2024

- BRICS+ – which united Russia, India and China – was strengthened. The group includes five long-standing members (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). In January 2024, five other countries joined or were invited to join: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.³⁷
- Alexei Navalny died on 16 February 2024 while in jail in Russia, in what many thought was a political assassination attributable to President Putin.³⁸

2025

- The USA placed tariffs on friendly nations, such as Canada and Mexico, treating all countries as the same (i.e. with no preferential treatment).
- President Trump suspended USA military aid and intelligence to the Ukraine, and the USA administration continued to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to sign a minerals deal and cede to a quick ceasefire.³⁹
- President Trump said it was easier to deal with Russian leader Vladimir Putin than Zelensky in his quest to end the war in Ukraine.⁴⁰
- USA joined Russia to vote against a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's war against Ukraine.⁴¹
- President Trump criticised the US–Japan Security Treaty, calling it 'unequal'. Under the Treaty, the USA is obliged to defend Japan, but Japan is not required to offer similar security guarantees to the USA.⁴²
- Since mid-February 2025, Australia and New Zealand have tracked a group of Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships, referred to as Task Force 107. China is one of several countries objecting to drills conducted in its national Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), without consent

of the local state, however, these three Chinese warships were found to be operating in Australia's 200-nautical-mile EEZ, creating a high level of unease.^{43,44}

- Europe made a significant commitment in March to increase defence funding by EUR 800 billion (over time) as part of the ReArm Europe plan to create a safe and resilient Europe.⁴⁵
- USA and Ukraine announce that they are discussing a proposed 30-day ceasefire with Russia.⁴⁶
- As we go to press, the USA has announced the repeal of the 'E.P.A.'s legal authority to regulate carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases', removing 'the legal basis that allows [the E.P.A.] to regulate the greenhouse gases that are heating the planet.'⁴⁷

President Trump's recent actions create uncertainty for small nations and arguably excessive opportunities for large nation states. For example, the USA satellite countries (those under its umbrella), which have relied on the USA for protection, are now aware the umbrella may no longer exist. This may lead to small countries looking to position themselves under the umbrella(s), or even become states, of other countries.

What can New Zealand do?

New Zealand is currently the equivalent of a cork on a turbulent sea. During uncertain times, there are a few well-known observations that will help us be more agile and responsive to change.

- Principles are more valuable than rules in that they enable more agile decision-making. New Zealand needs to create a set of principles, defining what it stands for and how it will operate.
- Timely information is more valuable than complete information. New Zealand needs to be engaged and informed by events globally, which means it needs to actively seek out diverse views and intelligence.
- History does not repeat, but it does rhyme. If President Putin finds it acceptable to support political assassinations and invade democratic countries and kill their citizens, there are similarities to Adolf Hitler. If President Trump wants to appease President Putin and prioritise short-term peace, there are similarities to Neville Chamberlain's appeasement strategy towards Nazi Germany.⁴⁸ If short-term goals become the priority, long-term goals will be harder to achieve. The war against climate change will be lost and democracy will become an old idea.

Many agree the world has fundamentally changed.⁴⁹ New Zealand needs to have a serious conversation about how we fit and operate within this new world. The scale of New Zealand's response is dependent on our perception of the risks that we see in the future. The bigger the perceived risks, the more serious the conversations.

Time to revisit global governance?

This section on how to make global governance more agile, productive and durable comes from an idea explored by the Institute in 2011.⁵⁰ Instead of focusing on one organisation (such as the UN) or one country (previously the USA), the idea is to build an ecosystem that consists of numerous relationships developed and trusted over time, through a range of trade, environmental and security agreements/organisations, that enable people from around the planet to get together around the table and to pick up the phone. World governance could be visualised as a bouncy ball, one that is agile and responsive to the challenges ahead.

Below are a few suggestions for New Zealand

- 1. Increase defence spending to over 2% of GDP.** Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Rt Hon Winston Peters, recently suggested that government needs to ‘get over 2 percent’ due to the lack of defence spending in previous years.⁵¹ This would be in line with NATO and Australia.⁵²
- 2. Build closer ties with Australia.** It is hard to see a situation where Australia and New Zealand would not support each other. Geographically, we have each other’s backs, we are trading partners (currently Australia is our third largest), and many New Zealanders live in Australia (and vice versa). We should build closer defence and security ties, including purchasing similar defence hardware, sharing intelligence, and conducting more drills together.
- 3. Support a Pacific Union, establish a Southern NATO, and strengthen the current Pacific Islands Forum.**

A Pacific Union could take many forms but we are imagining something that brings India, China and the United States together around the table, in order to develop, with other countries, a strategy for the Pacific Ocean.

A Southern NATO (related to NATO) could become the vehicle to ensure protection for a group of democratic countries like Australia, Japan, New Zealand and other Pacific nation states. NATO has been and continues to be a very effective tool in the Northern hemisphere. The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC), approved in 2021, includes the concept of NATO countries taking a 20-year view.⁵³

The Pacific Islands Forum (founded in 1971) is important but not strong enough or broad enough (in terms of membership) to provide security and stability for the Pacific. The current Forum comprises 18 members: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.⁵⁴ It is important to note recent activity by China in the Cook Islands⁵⁵ and Kiribati.⁵⁶
- 4. Support democratic nations.** New Zealand is too small and geographically distant from the Ukraine to join the ‘coalition of the willing’ but we could work towards creating a G100 (of small countries with populations under say 10 million) or a GDem (being a group of democratic nations that meet regularly to build on democracy).⁵⁷
- 5. Think and act tactically.** Undertake an independent review of our anticipatory governance system through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),⁵⁸ embark on a detailed programme of scenario analysis, and seek out critical thinkers to test and explore strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
- 6. Increase education spending – ‘Create a place where talent wants to live’.**⁵⁹ That was Sir Paul Callaghan’s vision for New Zealand in 2011, and it could not be more on point today. We invest strategically in the education and skills of our young people but we need them to come back from their overseas experiences and education and live and work in New Zealand – because it is a country they *want* to live in. We need to be a wealthy country so that we have choices and we can offer our young people good jobs. We need to also review and reset our immigration policy so that we attract people who can contribute to New Zealand’s principles and values (mentioned on page 3, under What can New Zealand do?).

- 7. Support climate action.** As a small, isolated country vulnerable to increasing climate extremes, it is critical that New Zealand pursues adaptation. In addition, work harder at leading change and applaud when the large countries take steps towards positive climate action. We need the big four to work together, or independently, to deliver a liveable planet for future generations. During times of increasing defence spending, some thought should be given to how to reduce carbon emissions. For example, is there such a thing as ‘green defence spending’?⁶⁰

New Zealand must be prepared. We live in a world where AI can be used irresponsibly, misinformation and disinformation are on the increase,⁶¹ and some nation states use their cyber capabilities to disrupt other nation states.⁶² The New Zealand public requires an active, accurate and independent supplier of news about world events and we need to raise young New Zealanders who seek the truth.

Defending the planet requires one eye on democracy and the other on climate. We are one world and we have one planet. We have a short window, at best five years, to defend the planet against climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change website states that in order to ‘limit global warming to 1.5°C, greenhouse gas emissions must peak before 2025 at the latest and decline 43% by 2030’.⁶³ Over that time, we will have the same four leaders in power. Although there is a lot of discussion in the media regarding the intentions of Russia and the USA, the narrative is constantly changing. However, the wild cards are China and India. They will be watching and thinking. It is in everyone’s interest that all four powers pivot and direct their energy, brains, and resources towards solving climate change. The wars for territory, the mineral wars and the tariff wars are really a side show, if we fail to win the war on climate change.

History tells us that appeasing an invader (in this case Russia) is likely to lead to a regional European War and maybe World War III, whereas making hard choices today is more likely to deliver future generations a healthy climate and a peaceful world in 2050 and beyond. Durable peace will require democratic nations to be more Churchill and less Chamberlain.

New Zealand may be small but we cannot hide.

Acknowledgements

This Think Piece acknowledges the determination of Ukrainian citizens to hold onto democracy, the voices of Russian citizens who, through their actions, have shown respect for democracy and to the American citizens who, through their contribution, have shown support for democracy around the globe.

Previous Think Pieces

Dr David Skilling wrote *Think Piece 38: The end of the beginning* in March 2022, noting that the Ukraine invasion was a watershed moment that will have far reaching consequences for the global system.⁶⁴ Arguably, we are seeing those consequences come to fruition. Secondly, in 2014, I wrote *Think Piece 20: Towards a Strategy of Freedom*. It discusses President Kennedy’s 1963 speech, ‘A Strategy of Peace’, and takes the perspective of what a strategy of freedom might look like through a climate lens.⁶⁵ It closes with Churchill’s observation: ‘I hold that we should rearm in order to parley.’



The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.

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