

HON JUDITH COLLINS KC, MINISTER OF DEFENCE

New Zealand Defence Force: Continued Participation in the Joint Commercial Operations Space Domain Awareness Programme

November 2025

This publication provides a Cabinet paper and associated minute of decision regarding the New Zealand Defence Force's participation in the Joint Commercial Operations Space Domain Awareness programme.

The pack comprises the following document:

- the August 2025 Cabinet paper and associated minute of decision *New Zealand Defence Force: Continued Participation in the Joint Commercial Operations Space Domain Awareness Programme* [FPS-25-MIN-0017 and FPS-25-SUB-0017].

This pack has been released on the Ministry of Defence website, available at:

www.defence.govt.nz/publications/new-zealand-defence-force-continued-participation-in-the-joint-commercial-operations-space-domain-awareness-programme

It has been necessary to withhold certain information in accordance with the following provisions of the Official Information Act 1982. Where information is withheld, the relevant sections of the Act are indicated in the body of the document.

Information is withheld where making it available would be likely to prejudice:

- the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the Government of New Zealand [section 6(a)]
- the entrusting of information to the Government of New Zealand on a basis of confidence by the Government of any other country or any agency of such a Government [section 6(b)(i)]

Further information is withheld to:

- maintain the constitutional conventions for the time being which protect the confidentiality of advice tendered by Ministers of the Crown and officials [section 9(2)(f)(iv)]
- maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinions [section 9(2)(g)(i)]
- maintain legal privilege [section 9(2)(h)]

Where information is withheld under section 9(2) of the Act it is not considered that the public interest outweighs the need to protect it.



Cabinet Foreign Policy and National Security Committee

Minute of Decision

This document contains information for the New Zealand Cabinet. It must be treated in confidence and handled in accordance with any security classification, or other endorsement. The information can only be released, including under the Official Information Act 1982, by persons with the appropriate authority.

New Zealand Defence Force: Continued Participation in the Joint Commercial Operations Space Domain Awareness Programme

Portfolio Defence

On 12 August 2025, the Cabinet Foreign Policy and National Security Committee:

- 1 **noted** that in August 2023, the previous government agreed that the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) provide regional coordination to Joint Commercial Operations (JCO) for a period of two years, with future participation to be reconsidered by Cabinet [ERS-23-MIN-0046];
- 2 **noted** that:
 - 2.1 JCO conducts space domain awareness, producing unclassified reports on risks and irresponsible behaviours in orbit;
 - 2.2 the reports are delivered to space operators and other interested parties, and JCO does not control or interfere with the operation of satellites;
- 3 **noted** that NZDF considers that JCO provides significant value for money to New Zealand, given the operational and diplomatic benefits it provides at a small operating cost;
- 4 **noted** that:

s6(a)
- 5 **approved** the continuation of New Zealand's contribution to JCO and to transition JCO to be an ongoing NZDF activity, and delegate decision-making authority within existing policy parameters to the Chief of Defence Force,

s6(a)

6 **noted** that NZDF will:

- 6.1 continue to report to the Minister of Defence on New Zealand's involvement in JCO; and
- 6.2 seek direction from the Minister of Defence in response to substantial developments where participation in JCO may go beyond New Zealand's policy parameters,

s6(a)

Jenny Vickers
Committee Secretary

Present:

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon
Rt Hon Winston Peters
Hon Judith Collins
Hon Mark Mitchell
Hon Nicola Grigg

Officials present from:

Office of the Prime Minister
Officials Committee for FPS
Office of the Chair of FPS
Office of the Minister of Defence

Office of the Minister of Defence

Chair, Foreign Policy and National Security Committee

PROPOSAL TO CONTINUE THE NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE'S PARTICIPATION IN THE JOINT COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS SPACE DOMAIN AWARENESS PROGRAMME

Proposal

1. To seek approval (i) to continue the New Zealand Defence Force's (NZDF) participation in the Joint Commercial Operations (JCO) space domain awareness (SDA) programme, and (ii) to transition this activity to an ongoing part of the NZDF's core business.

Relation to Government priorities

2. Contributing to the JCO programme supports Government's defence priorities of enhancing key international security partnerships, expanding New Zealand's military space capabilities, and growing economic benefits from space-related activities, as set out in the *National Security Strategy 2023* (NSS), the *Space and Advanced Aviation Strategy 2024-2030*, the National Security and Intelligence Priorities (NSIPs), the *Defence Capability Plan 2025*, and the reset of New Zealand's foreign policy [FPS-24-MIN002].

Executive summary

3. JCO is a US-led SDA programme that uses unclassified data to 'look up' at space, monitor the movement of satellites, and provide unclassified reports to space operators and researchers.

4. Cabinet approved New Zealand's initial two-year participation in JCO on 28 August 2023 [CAB-23-MIN-0394], which involves NZDF personnel working from Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) Base Auckland in Whenuapai. New Zealand coordinates the Pacific time zone (one of three coordinators with the US and UK).

5. New Zealand's involvement in JCO supports New Zealand's national security interests by: providing publicly shareable evidence of irresponsible behaviour in space; enabling the protection of satellites; demonstrating New Zealand's commitment to protecting space; and enhancing New Zealand's international security partnerships.

6. Participation in JCO is a visible New Zealand contribution to collective security in the space domain at a modest cost to Government

s9(2)(g)(i)

s6(b)(i)

s6(a)

8. This paper seeks Cabinet approval to continue New Zealand's participation in JCO, and also seeks approval to transition JCO to be an ongoing NZDF activity, with

authority delegated to the CDF for decisions on future NZDF contributions to JCO within established policy parameters. This is due to the s9(2)(g)(i) New Zealand-based nature of the operation and is consistent with other NZDF outputs.¹

9. If approved, Defence will ensure the Minister of Defence is informed of any substantial developments or changes to the NZDF's commitment to JCO, and will seek Ministerial direction s6(a)

The Joint Commercial Operations (JCO) programme

JCO programme overview

10. JCO is a US-led initiative to generate and use unclassified information for the protection of satellites. It uses commercial and military sensors (e.g. radar) to generate an operating picture of the location and movement of satellites. It is analogous to the use of radar to track aircraft and ships for air traffic control and maritime security.

11. JCO has a diverse membership with national cells provided by countries in Asia, North and South America, and Europe.² The information generated by JCO is distributed to space operators, academics and other stakeholders globally. A summary is distributed on a weekly basis.

12. JCO does not itself control satellites or other space activities, rather it monitors their activity passively and reports relevant observations. JCO operators use specialist software to analyse unclassified sensor data to identify when satellites have changed their orbital parameters. When abnormal movements are identified, unclassified reports are distributed to space operators globally. The information is used to – among other purposes – ensure that satellite movements do not create hazards for other satellites, move satellites to avoid collisions, and identify irresponsible activity or space debris that might cause damage.

s6(a)

New Zealand's current involvement in JCO

14. On 28 August 2023, Cabinet approved New Zealand's involvement in JCO for an initial period of two years. This contribution involves four NZDF personnel out of a pool of eight conducting JCO operations from RNZAF Base Auckland in Whenuapai s6(a)

¹ An example of this is the NZDF contribution to the Counter Terrorist Information Fusion centre in Singapore. This has been a deployment in the past and is now a 'business-as-usual' activity.

² s6(a)

s6(a)

15. [REDACTED] s6(a)

[REDACTED] Participation in JCO supports the development of Defence's space understanding and capability more generally, and also enables New Zealand's effective participation in other multinational defence space activities (such as Multi-National Force – Operation OLYMPIC DEFENDER).

16. New Zealand is one of three JCO coordinating nations, along with the United States and the United Kingdom. [REDACTED] s6(a)

[REDACTED] s6(a) New Zealand leads the work of national cells in Australia, South Korea, and Japan. As part of its involvement, the NZDF has trained JCO operators from Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Ukraine.

17. The operating cost of New Zealand's involvement in space operations, including JCO, is approximately \$180k for the 2025/26 financial year. These operations are funded within the existing baseline for Vote Defence Force: Protection of New Zealand and New Zealanders Multi-Category Allocation.

Options for New Zealand's future involvement in JCO

18. This paper asks Cabinet to make two connected decisions in relation to New Zealand's involvement in JCO.

18.1 First, whether to continue New Zealand's participation in JCO.

18.2 Second, should Cabinet decide to continue New Zealand's participation, whether to transition JCO to a business-as-usual Defence Force activity, or maintain its status as a deployment with regular Cabinet consideration.

19. These two decisions present as three options for Cabinet.

Option 1A Continue the current contribution to JCO and transition this activity to an ongoing part of NZDF's core business (recommended)

Option 1B Continue the current contribution to JCO for two years and require Defence to return to Cabinet for future authorisation (not recommended)

Option 2 Withdraw New Zealand from JCO (not recommended)

Option 1: Continue New Zealand's participation in JCO

20. Options 1A and 1B would both continue New Zealand's participation in JCO. Both options would deliver effectively the same value to New Zealand (see below), [REDACTED]

s9(2)(g)(i)

s6(a)

Strategic objectives for continued New Zealand participation in JCO

23. The routine review described above recommended adjusting New Zealand's objectives in relation to JCO, should Cabinet decide to continue New Zealand's involvement. Defence recommends New Zealand's JCO strategic objectives should be to:

- 23.1 Support New Zealand's national security, defence and foreign policy interests by contributing to efforts to monitor and manage security risks and threats in space and on Earth;
- 23.2 Strengthen and enhance relationships with likeminded partners by demonstrating commitment to addressing security challenges in the space domain, and support development of the international rules-based system relating to space security; and
- 23.3 Provide valuable experience for NZDF personnel to support military activities domestically and internationally.

Legal considerations for continued participation in JCO

s6(a), s9(2)(h)

Option 1A: Transitioning JCO to an ongoing part of the core business of NZDF

27. This option would continue New Zealand's participation in JCO, and transition that participation to be an ongoing, business-as-usual NZDF activity, with decision-making within existing policy parameters delegated to the Chief of Defence Force.

28. New Zealand's initial participation in JCO was treated as a 'deployment', which generally involves military personnel being sent in an official capacity overseas for an extended period or for high-risk activities. As a new and untested activity, authorisation by Cabinet was considered necessary for New Zealand's initial involvement in JCO and the deployment model allowed for a robust testing of ideas.

29. The value and nature of JCO is now better understood. Space operations, while still new and small-scale, are now better normalised within Defence. The establishment of No. 62 Squadron as a space squadron of the RNZAF reflects this normalisation. New Zealand's participation in JCO is now well-placed to transition to a business-as-

⁴ For example, www.space-track.org

usual activity, [REDACTED] s6(a)

30. Should Cabinet decide to transition JCO to a core business of the NZDF, decision-making related to New Zealand's involvement in JCO within existing policy parameters would be delegated to the Chief of Defence Force. Defence officials would continue to provide regular updates to the Minister of Defence (and other Ministers as required), [REDACTED] s6(a) [REDACTED] s6(a)

31. Transitioning JCO to an ongoing activity would have no financial implications.

Option 1B: Continue participation in JCO but retain regular Cabinet authorisation

32. Cabinet could decide that New Zealand's participation in JCO will continue to be treated as a 'deployment' requiring regular reauthorisation by Cabinet. This would continue to enable regular and direct examination by Cabinet of New Zealand's involvement. Defence officials would continue to review and provide advice on JCO to support Cabinet decision-making.

[REDACTED] s6(a)

34. Officials consider, however, that New Zealand's participation in JCO is now well-placed to transition to business-as-usual, and no longer requires regular Cabinet consideration.

35. Retaining regular Cabinet authorisation would have no financial implications.

Option 2: Withdrawing New Zealand's involvement in JCO

36. Cabinet could decide to end New Zealand's involvement in JCO. Ending New Zealand's involvement would release the resources currently used for JCO but would otherwise have limited benefits for New Zealand.

[REDACTED] s6(a), s6(b)(i)

39. Withdrawing from JCO could enable reprioritisation of the operating costs within the existing baseline for Vote Defence Force: Protection of New Zealand and New Zealanders Multi-Category Allocation.

Other Considerations

40. This paper has no cost of living, human rights, population, legislative, or climate implications.

Consultation

41. The contents of this paper have been developed by the Ministry of Defence and the New Zealand Defence Force, and have been consulted with the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, the Government Communications Security Bureau, the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Treasury.

Next steps and proactive release

42. The paper will be prepared for pro-active release with sections redacted according to the Official Information Act 1982 and approved by the Minister of Defence.

43. Defence officials will also prepare public statements setting out Cabinet's decision.

44. Officials will inform the United States and other relevant partner nations of Cabinet's decisions. s9(2)(g)(i)

Recommendations

The Minister of Defence recommends that the Committee:

1. **note** that Cabinet approved New Zealand's initial two-year participation in Joint Commercial Operations on 28 August 2023. Cabinet is now being asked to approve New Zealand's continued participation.
2. **note** that JCO conducts space domain awareness, producing unclassified reports on risks and irresponsible behaviours in orbit. The reports are delivered to space operators and other interested parties. JCO does **not** control or interfere with the operation of satellites.
3. **note** that Defence considers JCO to provide significant value-for-money to New Zealand given the operational and diplomatic benefits it provides at a small operating cost.

4. s6(a)

5. **agree to:**

EITHER

Option 1A: Continue New Zealand's contribution to JCO and transition this activity to an ongoing part of NZDF's core business (recommended)

5.1 **approve** the continuation of New Zealand's contribution to JCO and transition JCO to be an ongoing Defence Force activity, and delegate decision-making authority within existing policy parameters to the Chief of Defence Force, [REDACTED] s6(a)

5.2 **note** that Defence will continue to report to the Minister of Defence on New Zealand's involvement in JCO, [REDACTED] s9(2)(i)(ii)

OR

Option 1B: Continue New Zealand's contribution to JCO and require Defence to return to Cabinet for future authorisation (not recommended)

5.3 **approve** the continuation of New Zealand's contribution to JCO for two years, allow Defence to participate in the new activities mentioned in this paper with approval from the Minister of Defence, and require Defence to return to Cabinet for future authorisation beyond two years.

5.4 **note** that Defence officials will need to return to Cabinet to approve any further extension or withdrawal from the programme once the authorisation is due to expire.

OR

Option 2: Withdraw New Zealand from JCO (not recommended)

5.5 **approve** the withdrawal of New Zealand from the JCO programme.

[REDACTED] s6(a)

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Judith Collins KC MP
Minister of Defence