

BOOK REVIEW:  
STATE OF THREAT: THE CHALLENGES TO  
AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S  
NATIONAL SECURITY

Wil Hoverd & Deidre Ann McDonald (ed), *State of Threat: The challenges to Aotearoa New Zealand's national security*, Massey University Press (Auckland, 2023). ISBN 9781991016522.

# STATE OF THREAT

The Challenges to  
Aotearoa New Zealand's  
National Security



Edited by Wil Hoverd  
& Deidre Ann McDonald

*State of Threat: The Challenges to Aotearoa New Zealand's National Security* provides a range of relevant and thought-provoking perspectives on the National Security environment. However, the framing of the book's substantive content within the introduction and conclusion is potentially alienating to both a general reader and to someone with extensive experience in the sector. This was disappointing and detracts from what is otherwise a useful contribution to our national security literature.

The book's introduction uses excessive jargon and specialist language drawn from Critical Theory. As a professional in the National Security sector, the use of this dense language was an unwelcome distraction from what should be a clear-eyed account of the contemporary national security environment and its challenges.

As the introduction progressed, references to intersectionality, social constructivism, and "prioritised discourses that contain inherent bias associated with their hegemony (wealth, education, whiteness, heteronormativity and maleness)", left me wondering how long it would be before we knuckled down into topics like great power competition, cyber security, violent extremism, and vulnerabilities in our economic system.

The conclusion was equally problematic. As in the introduction, the assertions made lack substantiating references, and the claim that current conceptions of national security are "overwhelmingly white, educated, and male..." also runs counter to my own experience as a security professional across a quarter of a century.

As a leader in the national security sector, attracting a diverse range of people to a challenging and fulfilling career is an enduring pre-occupation. Stewardship is at the heart of every public service leader's responsibilities. To that end, I wish to highlight my own experiences in the hopes that it encourages a diverse range of people to the sector, rather than discourage them, which I fear this book's framing may do.

My first boss as an Officer Cadet in the NZ Army – a Captain, was a woman and gay. Of all those I have served under, she is the archetype upon which I've sought to model my own leadership style. She was followed closely in this regard by her second-in-command – a Māori Staff Sergeant from Rotorua who epitomised servant leadership. On graduation as an officer into the Army, my first commander was also a woman (now a DCE within the national security sector) – again someone who I have sought to model in my own approach to leadership. During a key period in my career the Chief of Army was Major General Jerry Mateparae, later Lieutenant General Sir Jerry Mateparae and Governor General of New Zealand. And when I left the Army, the first CE I had in the Intelligence and Security Sector was also a woman, celebrated for her leadership, stewardship, and professionalism.

In short, my experience is that many of the most accomplished and influential people within the national security sector come from a diverse range of backgrounds. Further, it was my experience that their colour, gender, and sexual orientation had no bearing on how they were viewed by me or my contemporaries. What mattered was their character and competence, not surface level characteristics. As Sir Wira Gardiner once remarked, "When your life depends on the actions and snap decisions of others you inevitably become more concerned about the qualities of dependability, consistency, integrity and

professionalism rather than race, gender or creed.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the redeeming and most attractive aspects of national security discourse, careers, and organisations. While academic critique and abstract notions contained within Critical Theory have their place, a book aimed at an audience primarily focused on practical, real-world, means to get important things done is not that place.

With the few words I have left to complete my review, I am pleased to say that the chapters contained within the book were overwhelmingly clear, concise, relevant, accessible, and thought-provoking. Key highlights include: Reuben Steff's chapter on the strategic risks and opportunities in a world where New Zealand finds its room to manoeuvre constrained by great power competition. Terry Johansen's chapter on what New Zealand might learn from the war in Ukraine and how we might position ourselves for the future. Nina Harding's seminal work on the experience of recruits into the NZ Army and the very real challenges of maintaining an all-volunteer Army. Phil Holdstock and John Moremon's look into the vulnerability and importance of submarine cables to New Zealand's national security. Madeline Marshall's insights into how intelligence concepts taken from military and law enforcement have been applied and enhanced to support the growing world of regulatory intelligence. Damien Rogers' reflections on potential weaknesses with intelligence oversight, including suggestions on how to strengthen assurance measures. Wil Hoverd's comparative analysis in the shifting language around what constitutes national security. John Battersby's reminder that history is a great teacher when it comes to national security threat – in this case terrorism. And finally, the two chapters that really get the reader thinking are those by Donna Carson on women in right-wing extremist groups and Jose Miguel Alonso-Trabanco's chapter on the risks and opportunities associated with crypto currency.

From the above, and other chapters, the themes that emerge from the book – those of greatest practical relevance include: the importance of public debate and an engaged public; the need to remain alert to changes in the international environment and to be proactive in our considerations of how to position ourselves for greatest benefit; the absolute centrality of biosecurity and the stability of international maritime trade systems to our economic wellbeing; and the risks of overlooking those things so easily overlooked, with key examples being our undersea cables and tradwives. In this, the book has succeeded in offering a source of inspiration, advice, and useful conversation starters within the national security sector or about national security within public discourse.

Overall, the book makes a clear case that security and defence matters. Enough that New Zealanders need to be more engaged in the debate. In this regard it largely achieves what it set out to achieve. The principal detractor was that the framing of the book in

<sup>1</sup> W. Gardiner, "Colour Blind: Māori in the Forces", *New Zealand Defence Quarterly*, Number Fifteen, Summer 1996. p.3.

language that was not reflective of its content did little to enhance the accessibility of the book's most important themes and ideas - and it could arguably have a counter-productive impact on the sector itself by discouraging a diverse range of people to join the national security field.

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