

THE CURRENT MILITARY & INTELLIGENCE OVERVIEW

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Nicky works as a researcher and investigative journalist, including on military and intelligence subjects. He has written seven books during the last 30 years, the most relevant in this context being one called "Other People's Wars".

First World New Zealanders

Charles Swindells was a wealthy Republican Party fund raiser from Portland, Oregon, a role that had won him a posting as the US Ambassador to New Zealand from 2001 to 2005. He was hostile to New Zealand's nuclear-free policy and near the end of his four-year posting, during which he had worked aggressively but unsuccessfully to change the policy, he wrote a secret cable back to Washington summing up his impressions of New Zealand. His impressions are very helpful.

"Foreign and defense policies in New Zealand are the product of an internal debate between two worlds," he wrote. The "first world" valued its relationship with the United States and regarded New Zealand as a US ally. The "other world" viewed the United States with suspicion or hostility and saw New Zealand as non-aligned.

Swindells' first category, which he approvingly called first-world New Zealanders, (quote) "recognizes that as a small country New Zealand cannot by itself impact world events, and sees the United States as the greatest source of global stability and positive change". This world "still sees New Zealand as a US ally, and is eager to play a role, however small, supporting us around the globe".

These were the people Swindells had found receptive to his efforts to get rid of the nuclear-free policy. The first-world solution to New Zealand's foreign policies, he wrote, "would be to get rid of New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation and return to ANZUS". However, the most interesting point was who his first worlders were. He described them as including some business professionals and "a handful of politicians". But by far the most influential part of Swindells' first worlders was senior military officers and senior foreign affairs and intelligence officials.

Then there is Swindells' other category, the other half of the long-term foreign policy divide in New Zealand. He had come to the frustrated realisation that the majority of New Zealanders wanted an independent foreign policy and supported the nuclear-free policy. Their view was that New Zealand's small size, geographic isolation and "internationalist" foreign policy protect it from harm. They saw the US as "a source of instability" and as bullying New Zealand over its nuclear stand. This group, he wrote, included "most politicians, media, academics and much of the public". Although Swindells was contemptuous of their views, it is a good description of the views of a majority of New Zealanders.

What he is talking about is the great, long-term rift in New Zealand foreign policy. In short, most New Zealanders want an independent foreign policy. They are not militaristic and, left to them, we'd have ethical and independent policies.

They are uneasy about NZ's long -term membership of an Anglo-American alliance. The clash between these competing positions is seen repeatedly through our history.

We see the influence of the Anglo-American alliance today on many fronts: New Zealand Navy ships transiting provocatively through the South China Sea; pressure to double military spending; pressure to join the anti-China AUKUS alliance; the recent opening of an US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) office in New Zealand; New Zealand playing an increasing role in space warfare; and on, and on.

Operation Burnham Inquiry

So why, despite New Zealanders' preference for an independent foreign policy, do the United States and Australian militaries still have so much influence over our country? A good place to start is the Operation Burnham inquiry, of which you may be only vaguely aware. The background to this was an NZ Special Air Service (SAS) raid in Afghanistan that accidentally led to civilian casualties and which also implicated the SAS in torture. After Labour was elected in 2017, they launched an independent inquiry into the allegations. I co-authored a book on the SAS raid called "Hit And Run", so I was very aware of the bureaucratic fight that followed.

From the start the NZ Defence Force was fully in deny-and-cover-up mode. There was no such raid, Chief of Defence Force Tim Keating said. He set up a 20-person office to argue against the book, admitting nothing. Military lawyers argued that the whole Inquiry had to occur in secret, depriving us of a chance to challenge the SAS's version of the facts. Military files were provided to the Inquiry at a snail's pace or not at all, for instance when the SAS mysteriously lost a video of a dead child from its computer system. It was educational to see how unscrupulous the Defence Force was as it tried to wriggle out of any responsibility or criticism.

But it was stranger even than I thought. Part way through the Inquiry, friendly insiders in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) approached me quietly and alerted me that whenever I released new information or made progress in front of the Inquiry, there would be an emergency meeting called in MFAT's international law section. I would have thought international law staff would be concerned to deal properly with allegations of civilian casualties and torture of prisoners; but no, the emergency meetings were devoted to strategising ways to disprove what I'd said and hide New Zealand's part in the crimes.

This encouraged me to look deeper into what was going on. It turned out that after the Inquiry began work, an inter-departmental committee had been formed to try to stop any criticism of the SAS. The committee included reps from the Defence Force, Ministry of Defence, the intelligence agencies, MFAT, even the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, whose Minister had called for the inquiry in the first place! They closed ranks and strategised how to pick holes in the allegations against the SAS.

At times it was surreal: during Inquiry hearings there would be a large room full of publicly funded lawyers and virtually every one of them was there trying to prove the book wrong. The point of this story is: after a while I realised very clearly who we were fighting. It wasn't the individual SAS officers, or the US military. The main obstacle through

years of the Inquiry was the New Zealand officials, in particular NZ military and foreign affairs officials: treacherous public servants paid by the public.

They are the same people pushing New Zealand towards AUKUS today. They are the people who lobbied for 20 years to continue deployments to the Afghanistan War. They are the people who fought to stop the nuclear free policy in the 1980s. They are a huge influence on defence, intelligence and foreign policy in New Zealand. They believe it's their responsibility to be as useful as possible to the US and to fight other people's efforts to have an independent foreign policy. They are the main reason New Zealand remains locked into the Anglo-American alliance.

Even after the Operation Burnham inquiry was over – where most of the civilian casualties and torture was proven correct – these same officials have continued to try to sabotage the recommendations of the Inquiry. The main concrete achievement of the Inquiry was recommending the creation of an independent Inspector-General of Defence. The idea was that when there were future allegations of wrongdoing by the Defence Force they could be independently investigated.

Stalling On Accountability

But this was the last thing the Defence Force wanted and they stalled on establishing the Inspector General for years. Then, once there was a new National led government, and Judith Collins was Minister of Defence, the officials got agreement that the whole idea of an independent Inspector-General of Defence would be dropped. A press release was issued saying it wouldn't go ahead. It was only by some unclear political good fortune that the Inspector General survived despite the officials.

And now, in recent months, the officials have come up with another way to achieve the same goal. Their idea is a policy change that means New Zealand military personnel fighting in overseas wars will not have to retain and bring home the records from their years of fighting. It was pure bureaucratic genius. They are currently moving towards a change in the Public Records Act so that the Defence Force would not be obliged to preserve the evidence of any future Operation Burnham scandals. This is why it is so important to know who is obstructing us, who is trying to keep New Zealand in the Anglo-American camp. The biggest obstacle to ethical and independent policies is the New Zealand defence, intelligence and foreign affairs officials, who identify far more with their Anglo-Saxon allies than their fellow citizens.

The next aspect we'll look at is intelligence and, essentially, it's the same story. As the country has become more modern and independent, both intelligence agencies have remained strongly under the influence of the Five Eyes partners – but like the military forces they claim to act independently. In 2013, the year the Edward Snowden intelligence leaks hit the news, the NZ Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) annual report said that its mission was “to inform and enhance the decision-making processes of the New Zealand Government”. It said:

“The Government is pursuing an independent foreign policy programme [and] they require access to information that helps clarify their understanding of events and issues”. This is very close to being a total lie. We know what the GCSB

was saying its role was in 2013. What did the Snowden documents reveal? One of the leaked Snowden documents was written in April 2013 by the US National Security Agency's country desk officer for New Zealand. It is called "NSA Intelligence Relationship with New Zealand". This document provides a list of intelligence operations the GCSB was conducting on behalf of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance just a few months before the GCSB annual report was published.

A section called "What Partner Provides to NSA" said the GCSB spies on communications from: "China, Japan, North Korean, Vietnam and South America, South Pacific island nations, Pakistan, India, Iran and Antarctica". It said the GCSB "continues to be especially helpful in its ability to provide NSA ready access to areas and countries difficult for the US to access". Other Snowden documents revealed that the GCSB also had a long-term operation targeting Bangladesh and rotations of staff to Afghanistan to help in US intelligence centres. The South Pacific nations and territories spied on included Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Kiribati, Samoa, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and French Polynesia – at the same time as New Zealand officials and politicians have claimed to have a special friendship with these countries.

It is likely that bits of this monitoring did inform the decision-making processes of the New Zealand government, but most by far appears to be alliance burden sharing, meaning GCSB spying on countries primarily as a contribution to the allies. For instance, the major Bangladesh programme was entirely a contribution to the US National Security Agency (New Zealand has no interests and not even an embassy in Bangladesh) and the monitoring of South Pacific governments has been a long-term duty as part of a geographical division of the globe between the intelligence allies. Again, these were about the GCSB's "ability to provide NSA ready access to areas and countries difficult for the US to access" .

In reality, it is more accurate to say that the GCSB spies on numerous countries primarily as duties within the intelligence alliance and that New Zealand government decisionmakers may gain some benefit but more in a secondary and incidental way. Senior public servant Simon Murdoch conducted a review of the New Zealand intelligence agencies in 2009 which explicitly said that many intelligence operations are done as alliance contributions.

His report, which was classified "Secret" and, so, presumably not expected to be seen by the public, said that the 100 million dollars of intelligence agency spending each year was (quote) "a subscription paid by New Zealand to belong to the 5-Eyes community." AGAIN: the intelligence agency spending each year was "a subscription paid by New Zealand to belong to the 5-Eyes community". He said this was (quote) "why the niche contributions we can make to 5-Eyes burden-sharing are so important and why agency heads strive to be responsive to partner demand".

Waihopai Plays Role In US Kill List

An example of a "niche contribution... responsive to partner demand" came to light in March 2024. Thanks to good work by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security – combined with top secret information from the Snowden papers – a United States intelligence system with the spooky name APPARITION came to light. It was located in the

Waihopai station and was used to support “military action” against so-called high value targets, using satellite communications intercepted at the station.

It certainly wasn’t for informing the decision-making processes of the New Zealand Government, since it seems that the New Zealand government wasn’t even told it was at the station. APPARITION was owned and operated by the US National Security Agency, and officials like Simon Murdoch presumably would have seen it as part of “the subscription paid by New Zealand to belong to the 5-Eyes community”.

This American equipment was already operating at Waihopai when the GCSB was writing in its annual report that it (the GCSB) was helping the Government to “pursue an independent foreign policy programme that contributes to global and regional stability”. They wrote this nonsense even when the GCSB staff and their political masters did not know who was being targeted for military action by the APPARITION system – not the people’s names, beliefs, what they had done to be on a US kill list or even the country they were being targeted in.

When information like the Snowden documents reaches the public, it could serve as an opportunity to increase the level of informed debate in the country. However, the New Zealand officials actively avoid admitting or discussing what the public has learned. For instance, I wrote the stories on the New Zealand-related Snowden documents and when I went to the Government for comment, the officials crafted the following response. They said:

Many of the Snowden documents were old and out of date, and they couldn’t rule out that some were fabricated. They were perhaps the best quality intelligence papers ever to reach the public, but for each following story the officials released word for word the same glib reply: Many of the Snowden documents were old and out of date, and they couldn’t rule out that some were fabricated.

They sent out this response before they even saw the news stories or the documents, and even though no other Governments were claiming this. There were serious revelations like spying on our South Pacific neighbours. But these public servants weren’t interested in arguing the case; just closing down public discussion. I hope that a picture is emerging of the attitudes and tactics of defence and foreign affairs officials in NZ.

Regular Secret Meetings

While public debate in New Zealand is minimised and thwarted, many of the important discussions involving New Zealand military and intelligence staff happen in secret rooms in foreign military bases around the world. On average twice a week, all year around, New Zealand Defence Force personnel fly to overseas meetings to discuss special forces equipment, intelligence, secure communications, patrol vehicle tactics and all the numerous other aspects of running a military and preparing for future wars. Sitting around the table at these meetings are always representatives from the same five English-speaking countries: the US, Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. These allied “standardisation” meetings are about preparing the smaller allies to be compatible and ready to go to war with the larger allies.

These meetings are central to military activity in New Zealand. This is where mid-level officers hear what is expected of the junior allies and absorb the Five Eyes world view; where they learn to think like the Five Eyes allies and lose touch with New Zealanders. You may have seen a feature I wrote recently about one of these five nation working group meetings. It was a classic example of what New Zealand officials talk about when they believe they are safely protected by secrecy.

The story is that a senior military officer went to a secret Five Eyes meeting in 2024 in Portsmouth, England, to discuss new command and control systems that are designed to integrate the five Five Eyes militaries in future wars. Such meetings happen in the greatest secrecy, but in this case one of the New Zealand participants took the secret papers home from the meeting and forgot about them. A year later it was spring cleaning time and the officer donated a pile of unwanted junk at the Lower Hutt Salvation Army – including the secret meeting documents.

Preparing For Possible War With China

This is one of those lucky breaks when we see behind the secrecy. I have been looking for inside sources for several years who would confirm that New Zealand is been drawn into preparing for possible war with China. And there it was. A document recorded that one of the priority work areas for the Five Eyes working group was to “develop a credible and effective combined joint, all-domain, command and control capability for counter-PRC Operations”.

PRC is the Peoples Republic of China and counter-PRC Operations means military action against China. The word “combined” refers to all the US’ allies and partners who were being integrated into the US command and control systems – in particular the five “Five Eyes” countries, the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It was a rare bit of serendipity to get this information (which also includes creepy bits about artificial intelligence [AI]) and if you haven’t seen it I recommend reading it (just search *Newsroom* and my name).

Even more recent than the Op Shop revelations, Auckland researcher Marco de Jong has just published more findings of his research into Five Eyes war fighting technology. This brings us up to date in this overview of military and intelligence issues in New Zealand. I quote him: “As New Zealand quietly explores involvement in Pillar II of the AUKUS security pact, documents obtained under the Official Information Act reveal it is already collaborating within the Five Eyes to develop highly networked, advanced military technologies”.

“These systems – known colloquially as ‘kill-webs’ – integrate data from ‘sensors’, including drones, radars, and satellites, which is then processed by AI-assisted ‘deciders’ for targeting by ‘effectors’ such as missiles and kamikaze drones. Conceived as an ‘Internet of military things’, each platform is in constant communication to enable coordinated, multi-domain attacks at machine speed”.

He draws attention to the proposal for New Zealand to contribute a motorised infantry battle group to an Australian Brigade, both within a US-led division – a truly terrible idea – and notes that the NZ Army has begun linking its tactical sensors into an Australian and multinational combined targeting process. “With the rise of networked warfare,” he

concludes, “technological integration within the Five Eyes has become a matter of sovereignty”. It risks “hardwiring” New Zealand into future Anglo-American wars.

What We Can Do About It

I want to finish by mentioning some things people can do to take action about what the military, intelligence and foreign affairs staff are doing in our name. ONE: Don't think opposing all this is too hard. Military organisations can seem impregnable, but they are actually fragile. They haven't won the arguments. Instead, they rely on fake arguments, such as needing high-level military equipment for disaster relief, cyclones and responding to climate change. They are very aware that they do not have the public on side. They are reliant on secrecy and spin to push ahead with their plans, and they worry about opinion turning against them. This means that every bit of work done exposing and challenging them is useful and appreciated by a receptive public.

TWO: Explain the issues in language people will understand. There are compelling arguments that help people see through the pro-military position. I recommend going back to the basics, challenging the idea that New Zealand, the US, the UK and Australia are “traditional partners” with shared values and interests – cliches from an earlier time that are repeated and repeated, implying that we should want to go off to war with these countries yet again. But the cliches are not true. First, the supposedly SHARED VALUES: New Zealand does not have shared values with an aggressive nuclear superpower that starts and supports more wars than any other country on Earth. Our small country needs peace and stability, and respect for international law, not war.

Then there are the supposedly SHARED INTERESTS. But we do not have shared interests with a nation that is planning war in the region where we live and with our largest trading partner. We do not have shared interests with a nation that is a role model of dangerous decline in democratic government. We also do not share beliefs about a RULES-BASED ORDER. This doesn't mean what it sounds like. It's not about the rules-based order of obeying United Nations decisions, respecting international law and supporting international legal institutions. As used in AUKUS-style rhetoric, the rules-based order means the US sets the rules for other countries but doesn't need to obey the rules itself.

And there's a simple reason for why we don't have shared values and interests: we're different! We're a peaceful, independent and increasingly Polynesian nation. Contrary to the like-minded nation cliches, most New Zealanders look at the US with alarm. It is a dangerous, unstable, highly militarised country and the source of much of the trouble in the world today. Why would we join an anti-China alliance and align ourselves more closely to US policies and plans? Lots of people know this. But it needs to be talked about over and over to be a driver of change.

THREE: Be informed. The more we know, the harder it is for bad things to continue. There are several great new researchers writing about the military build-up. On New Zealand military and intelligence issues, and the role that New

Zealand officials have in blocking change, I recommend reading the book "Other People's Wars". I spent five years writing it with the goal that people who read it would know more about these subjects than anyone in Parliament. Once again: ONE: Don't think it's too hard. TWO: Explain the issues in language people will understand. THREE: Be Informed. And finally, FOUR: Understand, think about and publicise the role of the defence and foreign affairs officials. They are the main obstacle to change.