Academic Spotlight: Reuben Steff talks big power

Dr Reuben Steff bemoans the absence of robust debate in New Zealand on foreign policy issues and the lack of investment in local research and strategic supply chains. He talks exclusively to *Line of Defence.*

Dr Reuben Steff, Senior Lecturer at the University of Waikato.

LoD: You've had a couple of books published lately. Tell us about them.

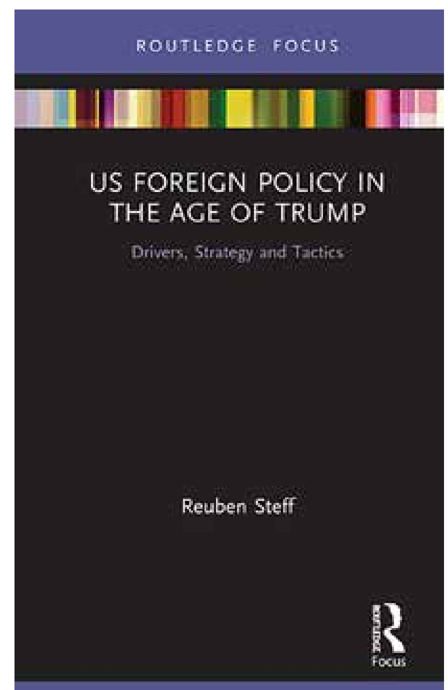
RS: In *US Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump* (Routledge, 2020), I investigate the drivers, tactics, and strategy that propelled the Trump administration's international agenda.

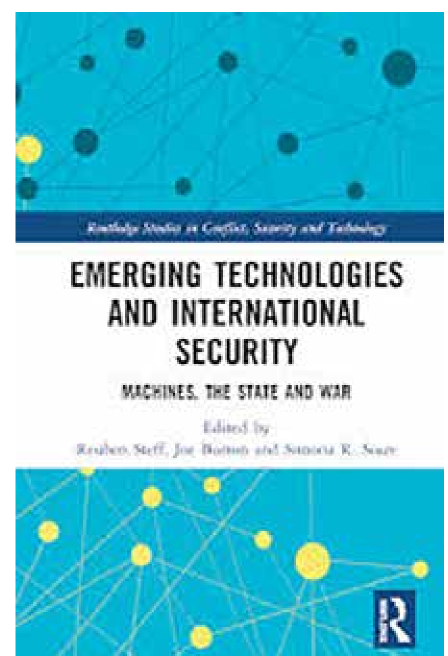
In short, it looks beyond the 'noise' of the Trump presidency to make sense of recent US foreign policy to examine the long-standing convictions of the president and the brutal worldview that he applies to US foreign policy; his hard-line negotiation tactics and employment of unpredictability to keep the world off-guard.

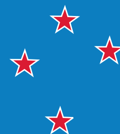
Finally, at the level of strategy, the book finds that the Trump administration is responding to a new multipolar structure of power through a turn towards realpolitik and a focus on great power competition. It also considers whether the administration has been successful in these efforts or if the methods and tactics employed have weakened America's position.

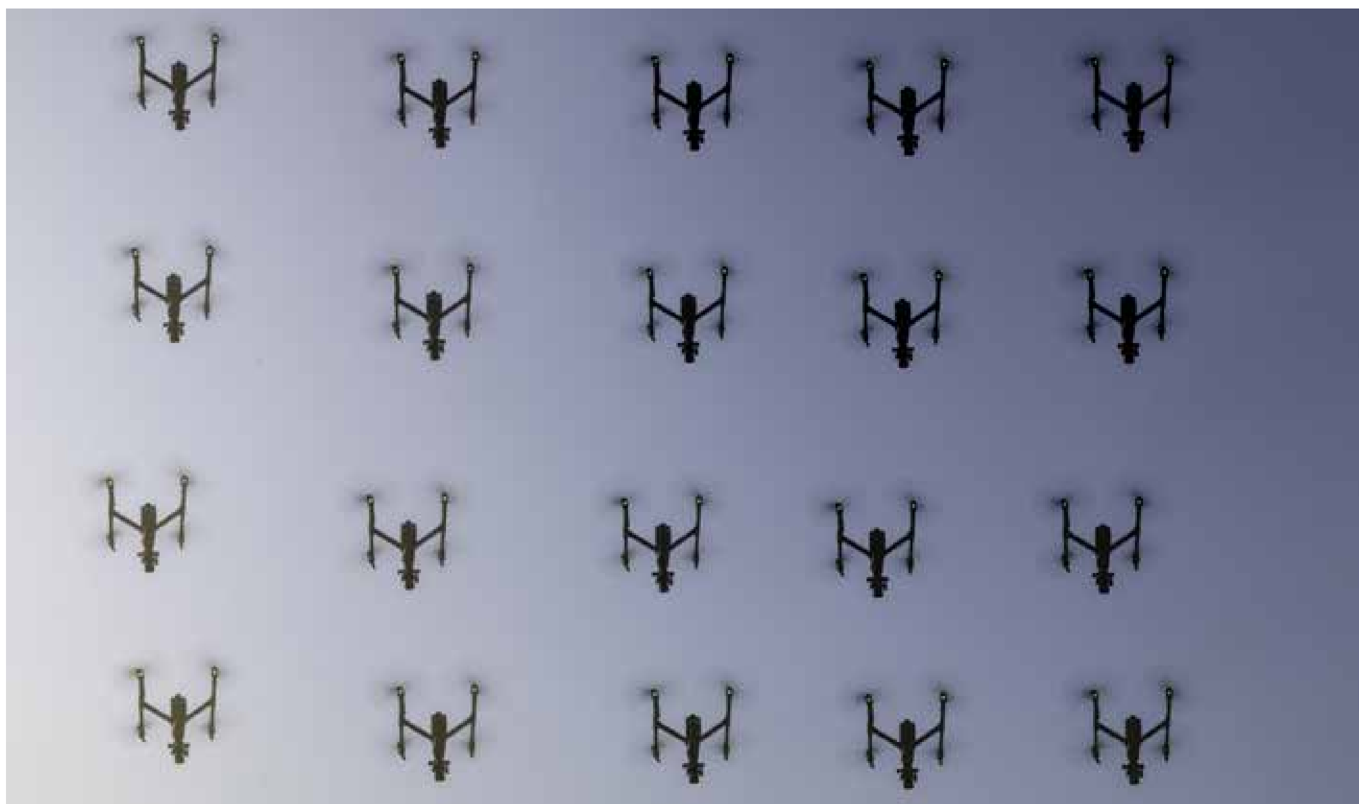
The second edited book, *Emerging Technologies and International Security: Machines, the State, and War* (Routledge, 2020), contains contributions from a multi-disciplinary pool of authors to analyse emerging technologies and their impact on the new international security environment.

The theme of the book is that while recent technological developments (such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics and automation, 3D printing, UAVs, blockchain, deepfakes and others) have the potential to transform international relations in positive ways, they also pose challenges to peace and









security. They raise new ethical, legal and political questions about the use of power and the role of humans in war and conflict.

The chapters examine the implications of these technologies for the balance of power, examining the strategies of the US, Russia and China to harness emerging technologies (and how their militaries and private corporations are responding); how smaller and less powerful states like New Zealand and non-state actors are adjusting; the political, ethical and legal implications of AI and automation; what these technologies mean for how war and power is understood and utilized in the 21st century; and how these technologies diffuse power away from the state to society, individuals and non-state actors.

LoD: What's your take on the current state of great power rivalry?

RS: The US-China relationship is in a downward spiral and how the two manage crises illustrates this. A key complication in recent years stems from the mixed messages out of Washington.

On one hand, Trump has portrayed himself as an arch-realist uninterested in ideology or human rights, even willing to trade his silence on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) human rights abuses in Xinjiang in exchange for trade deals and Beijing's purchase of US agricultural goods.

On the other, a bipartisan consensus has formed that views the US-China competition in starkly ideological terms, holding that CCP President Xi Jinping is guided by a totalitarian ideology – a development that will harden China's resolve to resist America and heighten their concern that the long-term goal of Washington is regime change, rather than mutual coexistence.

In any event, the changing relationship is accelerating US technological decoupling from China, and disengagement on 5G by US allies and partners (including New Zealand). It is also spurring the US to take actions to balance China's military rise along two vectors.

The first is by discussing the possibility of turning the QUAD (an informal strategic forum between the United States, Japan, Australia and India) into a security alliance like NATO (and that could eventually be extended to New Zealand). The second is the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.

US Senate Armed Services Committee in June 2020, this will be rolled out in the coming years and is designed to "maintain a credible balance of military power" vis-à-vis China by increasing investments to strengthen America's regional military presence and to sustain its military-technological edge.

This includes increased funding to boost US defences in the Asia-Pacific with China specifically in mind, and will lead to modified and more flexible basing arrangements, improve active and passive defences against theatre cruise, ballistic and hypersonic missiles, and strengthen alliances and partnerships.

A Biden administration is unlikely to fundamentally change this trajectory. On one hand, we can expect Biden to try to calm international tensions, and forge broad coalitions to address global governance issues (such as trade, climate and nuclear non-proliferation) that will invigorate the layer of cooperation between the China and the US. However, on the other, Biden has promised to place ideology and values – in particular, an emphasis on upholding and spreading democratic norms and values (objectives Trump had no interest in) – to the forefront of US foreign policy.

Towards this end, Biden has strongly criticised China, calling Xi Jinping a "thug" who "doesn't have

a democratic bone in his body", and dubbed China's treatment of Uighur Muslims as a "genocide". If we see a renewed push by the incoming Biden administration for greater economic engagement with the region (that excludes Beijing), we could be witnessing the rollout of a belated military-economic strategy to contain China.

The most significant and eye-catching policy is Biden's intention to hold a "Summit for Democracy" in 2021 "to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world" and build a united front of democratic allies to challenge illiberal states.

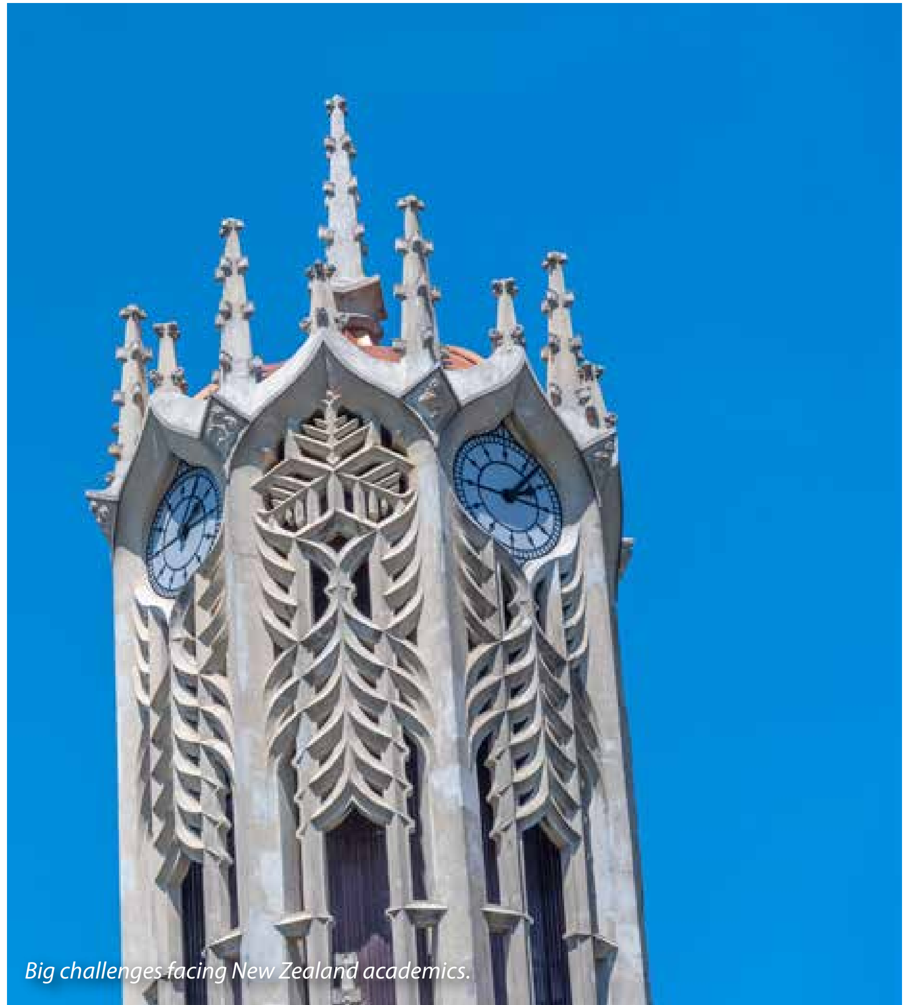
Collectively, this suggests that Biden is nearer to the neoconservative wing of US foreign policy that seeks to use US power to promote American values. As such, a Biden administration is likely to be more focused in its opposition to China than the Trump administration, calling upon America's Asia-Pacific allies to clearly take a stand alongside them. Choppy waters are ahead.

LoD: What part can a small state like New Zealand meaningfully play in dispersing great power tensions in our region?

RS: We could make a positive contribution if we were invited to play some kind of intermediary role. However, it would be presumptuous to declare we have special expertise that could cut the Gordian Knot of worsening US-China relations.

If New Zealand wanted to build up capacity in this area, it should consider former Defence Minister Wayne Mapp's suggestion to fund an Aotearoa Peace Research Institute modelled on the Norwegian Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO).

Furthermore, New Zealand presently benefits from good political remains with both states – the US primarily for security and defence reasons and China for our economy. The more we overtly get involved the greater the risk either side will use their leverage over New Zealand to pressure us to take positions that antagonises the other, and in turn risks retaliatory action.



Big challenges facing New Zealand academics.

LoD: In terms of the above, what role can/do New Zealand academics play?

RS: With clear eyes, they must continue to draw attention to the emerging geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific security environment and developments in the South Pacific, and decipher what they mean for New Zealand's national security.

Compared to practitioners we (academics) have more time to undertake research on these topics, and government agencies could make it clearer to us what specific research they would find valuable.

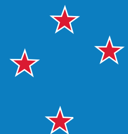
LoD: What are the key challenges facing New Zealand's defence/ strategic/security studies and international relations research centres?

RS: I think the challenges are systematic. On most foreign policy issues (many of which link to our domestic policy settings), New Zealand lacks robust debate. For a variety of reasons, when it comes to great power tensions and our place in it, New Zealand scholars are loathe to put forward new ideas or even set out their own positions clearly.

Instead, there is constant celebration and a call for New Zealand to maintain foreign policy 'independence'. This sounds nice but means a different thing to everyone, and therefore means nothing. It distorts, rather than clarifies.

There is also, despite worsening trends and growing great power competition, virtually no debate between political parties over foreign policy – this was starkly illustrated in the recent general election in which it was barely mentioned.

Lack of funding is another. If we want sustained and systematic research into what the emerging global and regional security environment means for New Zealand's national security interests, the money has to be there to free up scholars to undertake this research.



I think the same goes for our defence forces – they need to respond to signals from the international system and bolster/adjust our forces accordingly. These include a new era of great power competition that extends into our part of the world (our key allies, Australia and the US, are gearing up for this); emerging technologies, many of which we do not fully understand and pose novel security threats; and diffusion of power away from states to more non-state actors (including individuals).

Finally, New Zealand needs a greater capacity for self-reliance. This does not necessarily stand in opposition to our support for multilateralism and global co-operation, but assuming that just-in-time supply chains and the cheapest price for every international good will always provide us with what we need is incredibly risky. Our luck will eventually run out.

Some things are of strategic import – like fertiliser (that we currently buy offshore), fuels and the capacity to refine them, and the ability to manufacture some key goods (for example basic pharmaceuticals and medicines). We may also eventually want an independent capability to deter larger hostile powers from blackmailing us.

The sooner we start discussing these things in a frank manner, prioritising what we need and how we can acquire them, the better.

LoD: What was your road into an academic career? What is your key motivator as an academic?

RS: My original interest in international affairs and academia came from my parents. My father is American, and has always had one eye on the world beyond New Zealand, and both my parents in general are willing to question established shibboleths.

Therefore I naturally gravitated towards international issues, and spent nine years at the University of Otago studying to get my PhD in strategic studies, examining the theory and strategy of nuclear deterrence and its intersection with great power competition from 1945 to 2014.

I then spent 2.5 years in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which gave me an insight into the 'real world' of international relations and allowed me to deepen my understanding of the link between theory and practice. An academic job then opened up at the University of Waikato and I was lucky enough to get it.

The motivator? At a selfish level, I enjoy doing deep dives into dense topics and concepts, breaking them down, finding gaps, and then writing about them and sharing my insights with others. The creation of new ideas and expanding the breadth of debate is something I really enjoy.

Now that I am a lecturer, I feel it is very important to assist our students to understand the world they live in, give them perspective amidst all the chaos and information bombarding them, and provide them with practical skills to succeed in the workplace.