

White Flag? â€“ An examination of the UK's defence capability. Michael Ashcroft & Isabel Oakeshott from Biteback Publishing.

This is a very timely book, says reviewer Nick Watts. Whitehall is in the midst of the latest iteration of a recurring debate: How big a military does the UK need, and what is it for? This book delves into this question. In 1962 Dean Acheson, former US Secretary of State in the Truman era, remarked that Britain had lost an empire and not yet found a role. The resolution of this continuing dilemma affects the UK's armed forces, and the roles they might be expected to undertake, as Global Britain seeks to redefine itself.

The Armed Forces are an arm of government policy â€“ as long as the government knows what it wants them to do. Arguments about defence budgets, types of equipment and the likely threats faced by the UK complicate the role of the armed forces. Policy makers try to second guess the future by placing big bets on 'exotic' equipment, at a time when technology has never been more agile.

The book draws attention to an MOD programme 'Agile Warrior' in which the leaders of tomorrow's army think about how they will fight tomorrow's wars. This example demonstrates a much needed attitude within the military generally, namely not trying to fight the last war, with different equipment. This matters, because the services rely on the successful balance of people and kit. Invest too little in either and, as the book points out, the British military risks become irrelevant to the changing threat environment.

Unfortunately, the world has not become a kinder, gentler place since the end of the Second World War and the advent of the nuclear threat. Warfare has become increasingly low tech, with Kalashnikovs and machetes responsible for most deaths in recent conflicts. The UK might choose to retreat within its island fortress, but our position as a member of the P 5 at the UN requires it to play a role in world affairs. Our network of alliances and trading links gives Britain a global interest, whether we like it or not. While the US seemingly steps back from its role as leader of the west, it is not unreasonable to expect that the UK can continue to play a significant role on the world stage.

The Foreword to the book by General Sir Mike Jackson neatly summarizes the matter: "Rather than reflecting what is thought to be affordable, our armed forces should reflect the position we wish our country to hold in the world, and the threats to which we believe they may have to respond. Only then, when we have identified what we expect of our services, can we begin to assess what the necessary capabilities are going to cost. When governments alight on an arbitrary figure....and ask defence chiefs to make the best of it, they are in danger of putting our security at risk."

The book takes a look at the threat, which all examinations of national security should do. It then examines the politics, the services and the relationship between Defence and Industry. As a study in the dilemma facing contemporary planners and policy makers, the book encapsulates the contemporary scene very well.

Policy makers would do well to study the appendix, a global defence survey, on attitudes towards power and influence in the world. Ashcroft has a reputation for conducting opinion polls which dig below the surface of headline attitudes. In this survey the UK ranks 5th, roughly equivalent to its GDP ranking. The UK's armed forces were seen as stronger and more effective than those of Germany and France, but behind the USA, China and Russia. The UK is still seen as one of the most influential world powers. Three quarters of respondents in the UK felt that the treat to national security is higher today than it was thirty years ago.

Politicians may reflect that their role is to shape opinion, rather than be led by it. If there are

those in public life who believe that Britain's defence requires more funding, they must step up and make the case; this book gives them plenty of ammunition.