

A new RUSI book reveals an 'institutional blindness' at the heart of UK defence policy. This is exemplified by a pervasive obsession with 'grey zone' tools that ignores both real-world deterrence dynamics and the complex ends adversaries are pursuing using both conventional and unconventional methods.

Necessary Heresies, edited by RUSI experts Dr Jack Watling and Justin Bronk, highlights a range of damaging narratives and assumptions that dominate thinking at the highest levels of UK defence policy.

Emerging technologies are changing how militaries are structured and how they will fight in the future.

However, the authors of this book argue that many of the interpretations currently dominating the discourse in UK Defence about how these technologies and supposedly novel adversary activities will shape the future operating environment are provably false.

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The authors argue that the 'grey zone' concept is an 'intellectual dustbin' that confuses ways and ends. They also contend that cyber warfare is the slowest and least precise form of conflict, and that the military is far more casualty-averse than either political leaders or the public.

The authors also challenge current assumptions by arguing that munitions can be hypersonic, smart or cheap enough to field in large numbers, but not all three; that armies have a basic requirement for significant combat mass in spite of novel technologies and doctrinal concepts; and that any-sensor-to-any-shooter networks are not as transformative or universally applicable as regularly claimed.

The authors argue that the narratives and assumptions put forward by the outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff not only lack crucial nuance and are unsound, but also produce "potentially harmful distortionary effects throughout Defence." This book attempts to challenge some of these misleading narratives before they drive acquisition and force-design decisions that undermine the British Armed Forces.

The book argues that:

"Through years of repetition, narratives about the rapidly changing character of warfare and the transformative effects of novel technologies have become akin to gospel truths, enshrined in policy documents."

Senior defence policy planning is hampered by 'received wisdom'.

"In many areas of Defence policy such as cyber warfare, space or novel weapons systems, deep subject matter expertise is required to understand the potential benefits and limitations. The same is true of attempts to assess the policies and actions of strategic competitors with very different cultural and geopolitical viewpoints. Crucial nuances and practical constraints are almost unavoidably lost in translation as senior decision makers shape policy and generalists rewrite doctrine and strategy documents based on their own understanding of briefings given by specialist practitioners and subject matter experts. This tendency is exacerbated by a natural inclination to over-hype the potential for novel technologies or strategies to provide transformative effects. Incompatible demands for increased financial and manpower efficiency, equipment modernisation, improved force readiness, resilience, and constant engagement in global competition incentivise defence planners and policy makers to seek silver bullet solutions. Once policy has been stated on an issue, further nuances and important caveats are often lost as the wider policy community try to tailor their own outputs to align with what they perceive as the new high-level consensus. As such, the narratives that end up shaping much of the 'coal face' work in Defence are not the (usually) nuanced and well caveated statements on novel technologies, domain activities or adversary tactics prepared and published by specialists. Instead, they are often mantras or collective 'received wisdom' that in practice has been oversimplified or distorted by repeated translation, repetition, and transmission. "

Chapters in this book:

The Slow and Imprecise Art of Cyber Warfare  
The Grey Zone Is Defined by the Defender  
Doing Less with Less in the Land Domain  
Swarming Munitions, UAVs and the Myth of Cheap Mass  
The Lights May Go Out, But the Band Plays On  
In Space, No One Will See You Fight  
More Sensors Than Sense