

## THE NAVAL REVIEW - NOVEMBER 2014

### THE ACCIDENTIAL ADMIRAL: A SAILOR TAKES COMMAND AT NATO

by James Stavridis  
(Naval Institute Press - £19.99)  
ISBN 9781 6125 1704 9

Despite the self-effacing title, readers will quickly understand that the author's appointment as the first admiral to be NATO's Supreme Commander in Europe was anything but accidental. In a cogent preface Admiral Stavridis sets out the framework for this memoir of his time in command, from 2009 to 2013. He seeks to explain not so much what happened (although much did, as we shall see), but why.

The complexity of the role is clear from an early summary of the tasks facing the Alliance during the admiral's tenure. These ranged from combat in Afghanistan and Libya, through constabulary operations such as counter-piracy, to regional engagement with Russia. Tongue-in-cheek, the author wonders what his Cold War predecessors did with their time, focused almost exclusively on the relatively clear mission of deterring the Warsaw Pact.

Much of the strength of the book lies in its style and structure. The text is admirably succinct but retains warmth and candour throughout, which make for an engaging read. A good balance is struck between specific events during the author's command and general issues of concern to today's senior officer. Early chapters concentrate on developments in NATO campaigns such as Afghanistan and Libya but, importantly, also focus on other places of strategic interest to the Alliance, such as the Balkans, Israel and Palestine, Russia and Syria. Such coverage of regions where NATO is not directly engaged in operations is welcome, and only emphasises the organisation's increasingly global geostrategic concerns.

Later chapters focus on broader issues such as leadership, strategic communications, strategic planning and innovation. Some of the author's guiding principles are unsurprising and perhaps well-understood, such as the importance of cooperation within and outside NATO in order to address the alliance's evolving challenges. However, he has much to say which is fresh and thought-provoking, including on the value of public-private partnership and the need for effective strategic communications in what can often be a battle of ideas as well as one involving combat.

His readiness to challenge the status quo is apparent in other areas. For example, the admiral points out that militaries often rely on repetitive training to ensure that they are well-prepared for certain expected tasks, but he highlights the risks of this approach in stifling innovation. Setting up innovation cells was a key part of the admiral's command style. He is equally forthright in questioning the strategic planning process and making persuasive recommendations on how it could be improved.

In a memoir of such a high-profile command we would expect to hear the author's impressions of other senior leaders, and we are not disappointed. The story includes meetings with Presidents Obama and Karzai, recent US Secretaries of Defense and NATO's political and military leadership, offering an inside view at a turbulent time in the Alliance's history. The book is well-timed, with the author's strong views on engagement with Russia and on the Israel-Palestine conflict being particularly apposite.

The conclusion is as instructive as what goes before. Admiral Stavridis makes a powerful case for NATO's continuing relevance, arguing that it should not restrict itself to its own territory if it is to meet global threats. He also addresses future challenges, citing his greatest concern as "convergence", the coming together of diverse threats such as narcotics and terrorism which become even more serious when combined.

In this concise and readable memoir, Admiral Stavridis has provided an insightful overview of NATO operations during his eventful command. More importantly, perhaps, he has made a well-informed contribution to the debate about the future of the Alliance.

Simon Bellamy  
Lieut., RNR