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Progress in delivering the British Army's armoured vehicle capability

1. We welcome the Defence Committee's decision to measure the progress that has been made in delivering the British Army's armoured vehicle capability.
2. The British Army's armoured vehicle capability represents one of a number of significant work strands that the MoD is currently undertaking which are competing for the continuing funding by the defence budget. As the National Audit Office have highlighted, the current Equipment Plan is unaffordable and it is unclear how the MoD will resolve the financial shortfall.¹ Previous assumptions about efficiency savings and the potential sale of MoD assets have proven to be optimistic.²
3. We anticipate that the fortunes of the UK's armoured vehicle capability will follow review of its progress, however, there are a number of issues associated with measuring this. The first of these is defining what criteria that we are measuring the capability against. Historically there has always been a tension within the Army between a focus on a continental commitment and a focus on expeditionary warfare in some form beyond Europe. Since the end of the Second World War this has effectively been crudely divided between those who want to focus the Army's attention on some form of armoured warfare on the North German Plain (and more recently in Poland and the Baltic States), compared to those who have looked at missions beyond Europe often involving the Army in some form of counter-insurgency campaign, with Iraq and Afghanistan being just the most recent examples.
4. In some respects the current Strike Brigade is a compromise. It attempts to bridge both worldviews, but may not satisfy either because it is too heavy to be deployed beyond Europe and too lightly protected to be used in Europe. It is also indicative of a process of constant change within army thinking.³
5. Following on from this if we look at the basic structure of the army over the last two decades we can see that there has been a constant stream of quite profound changes as the army has constantly refocused on different potential enemies and different missions. In 1998 the Strategic

¹ National Audit Office, 'Ministry of Defence – The Equipment Plan 2019-2029', *HC.111*, session 2019-20, (London: TSO, 2020), <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Equipment-Plan-2019-to-2029.pdf>

² Paul N Cornish and Andrew M Dorman, 'Breaking the mould: the United Kingdom Strategic Defence Review 2010', *International Affairs*, vol.86, no.2, March 2010, pp.395-410, Paul N Cornish and Andrew M Dorman, 'Complex security and strategic latency: the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015', *International Affairs*, vol.91, no.2, March 2015, pp.351-70.

³ National Audit Office, 'The cost effective delivery of an armoured vehicle capability', *HC.1,029*, session 2010-12, (London: TSO, 2011). National Audit Office, 'Army 2020', *HC.263*, (London: TSO, 2014).

Defence Review proposed to reconfigure the army from a force of 3 armoured, two mechanized, one air mobile and one airborne brigades into one comprising three armoured, three motorized and one air assault brigades.

6. However, the 2003/4 'Delivering Security in a Changing World' review concluded that the army was too heavy and effectively proposed converting one armoured brigade into a light brigade. With operations in Afghanistan and Iraq the army added additional light brigades. This was again changed in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review which proposed a structure of 5 composite brigades and one air assault brigade. Within two years this was changed again to 3 armoured infantry brigades and an air assault brigade only for this to be altered again in the 2015 review which called for two armoured infantry brigades, two new Strike brigades and an air assault brigade. The brief example of changes in brigade orientation masks the accompanying reconfiguration of units within these different brigades. Even what might seem constant – the creation and maintenance of an air assault brigade hides the fact that even here there have been many changes in units assigned to that brigade. In other words, whilst the current plans for the army's armoured vehicle capability might be right at a particular point in time, we can almost certainly guarantee that they will be overtaken by future reconfigurations of the army's structure and needs. Only by ending this ceaseless reconfiguration will the MoD be able to develop and implement a coherent armoured vehicle programme.

7. Given the above it is perhaps inevitable that there hasn't been a consistent approach to the acquisition of individual capabilities within the army. The Boxer programme is a classic example of this. It emerged from the 1998 SDR as a multinational programme with Germany and the Netherlands. The emphasis on protection followed on from operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, but experience of operations in Sierra Leone and the first stages of Afghanistan shifted the emphasis away from protection in favour of being able to be carried by the C-130J and A400M. Eventually, the MoD withdrew from the Boxer programme after the completion of development and then embarked on what became the FRES programme. The air-portable requirement was subsequently revoked as enhanced protection was again emphasized following the operational experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. Now the MoD has ordered an initial batch of Boxers which will be delivered almost two decades after the UK withdrew from the programme at a much higher price to support the new Strike brigades. It is entirely feasible to see that the Strike concept could be abandoned as part of the Integrated Review in order to preserve the armoured capability and then the army will be left with 500 or so new Boxers without a requirement for them. This reinforces the need for a consistent approach and also encourages a rationalization of the variety of armoured vehicles. For example, could the acquisition of Boxer be used to replace the existing Warrior IFVs?

Ways Forward

8. Setting aside the changes to the army and constant changes in requirements, the wider move to first FRES and now the Strike Brigades reflects a further change in emphasis within the army. Traditionally, the other two Services emphasized technology at the expense of personnel whilst the army emphasized personnel at the expense of equipment. Since 2000 and the army's regular engagement with new concepts about the future character of conflict, the army has moved to a requirement for both personnel and high technology equipment. This has added a further financial challenge to the overall defence budget that has only been partially offset by

reductions in army personnel and cuts to the other two services. If the basic division of the defence budget between the TLBs remains roughly as it is the army will need to decide whether it wishes to prioritize personnel or equipment.

9. Considerable attention has been given by the other Services towards developing a Combat Air and Shipbuilding Strategy as part of maintaining an onshore defence industrial base. There has been some discussion about whether there needs to be a similar approach for land systems. What seems obvious is that the current work on the army's armoured vehicle capability reflects more than a decade of indecision, non-decision and changes in decision which means that there is now a requirement to replace/modernize almost the entire capability in less than a decade. This will require serious investment, as well as serious strategy. Without care, industry will be given an initial feast of orders before facing an inevitable famine when it comes to production. For industry to maximize efficiency and reduce cost then a more consistent flow of work is needed.
10. We advocate a similar approach for land systems, to which less thought and attention has been devoted. We recommend that effort is put towards this endeavour not least to establish whether heavy armour is a priority for the British Army. If so, it will require serious investment, as well as serious strategy. Without care, industry potentially will be given an initial feast before facing an inevitable famine when it comes to production.
11. More generally, we would strongly advocate a period of stability in strategy without numerous changes to force structure. This period is essential if we are to think through the role of the armoured vehicle in UK national strategy, and from there build a long-term force structure, underpinned by a procurement strategy to deliver that.

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