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Equipment highs and Budget lows: How 'no votes in Defence' may be coming to an end

Written by Connor Smart, Political Consultant on 13 June 2018



The month of May has been a busy one in Defence which may be an indication of things to come. The successful integration into service of the MBDA Sea Ceptor Air Defence system onto the Type 23 frigates and the successful first trials firing of the Land Ceptor system highlight an increasingly modernising defence procurement portfolio. Increasingly, highly sophisticated bits of kit are making their way into the hands of the Armed Forces who will likely use this equipment for the next twenty or thirty years plus.

Mixed signals are emanating though. Bound up within the good news of every successful firing of a new missile system or the launch of every new warship is the double-headed nightmare of cost and policy. It may in fact be a good thing that Gavin Williamson is the youngest ever holder of the office as he needs to call upon substantial reserves of energy and willpower to handle a department struggling to manage both its cost and policy obligations.

On the cost front, the Public Accounts Committee in early May published a report which found serious affordability gaps in the Defence Equipment Plan 2017-27. An affordability gap of £4.9 billion to £20.8 billion could potentially be in the offing with Committee Chair, Meg Hillier commenting that the MoD's potential inability to fund its equipment needs as "concerning". A National Audit Office report this

month has also highlighted issues within the Defence Nuclear Enterprise managed by the MoD. £2.9 billion could be the “gap between the expected spend on equipment and support and the available budget, 2018 to 2028”.

Then there are the personnel problems plaguing the MoD with a shortage of skilled Royal Navy nuclear staff, a shortfall in military personnel in skilled trades, a historically low Army regular headcount and the latest Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey finding decreases in morale. Debates are ongoing about whether or not the UK Armed Forces has the mass or capability to do all that is asked of it. Defence Committee Chair Dr Julian Lewis has highlighted concerns about frigate and destroyer numbers and the debateable 2% spend of GDP on defence and the prolonged process over the seventh Astute Class submarine also raises questions about funding and efficiency.

These Departmental issues though, difficult enough as they are on their own are bound up with the political, both domestically and internationally.

On the domestic front, the debate that surrounded the government decision to contract the new Fleet Solid Support Ships overseas led Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn to travel to Glasgow to voice his support for domestic shipbuilding. The impact of defence policy didn't stop there though as in the wake of the recent local elections Johnny Mercer MP publicly voiced his concerns that the government's handling of defence contributed to the Conservative party losses in the city. With shipbuilding and armed forces affiliation a very meaningful relationship for some communities was Mercer onto something in that defence is facing key challenges that aren't being handled properly?

Parallel to this also runs the legacy of the IHAT process and the new legal cases being brought against former and serving armed forces personnel with a particularly heated exchange taking place between Williamson and Mercer in a committee oral evidence session on the issue.

Defence is also facing new scrutiny and pressure to formulate itself in a post-Brexit and changing international system. Rising regional powers like China, Russia, India and Iran require new thinking and policy in order to handle the changing environment which is a far cry away from the post-9/11 focus on terrorism and nation-building which required a whole other set of capabilities.

Speeches by Gavin Williamson at RUSI on sea power and Tom Tugendhat on defending a rules based order recently indicate an exciting time for a reconceptualization of Britain's role in the world which will bring defence policy, funding and British identity and values to the fore. Defence Minister Tobias Ellwood's recent call for more funding and the Conservative backbench push last year against further cuts all indicate the way defence shall be going.

Defence in the coming months will be more political, more emotive and more scrutinised than in recent times. With the global security environment changing rapidly, the way we look at and deal with defence will change as well and the debate about capability, funding and the ever-present politics will become a more mainstream agenda. The time of 'no votes in defence' may be coming to an end.

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