



"Events, dear boy, events"

Many Commentary readers will have been following the recent tribulations of the UK's Prime Minister. This is not the forum for any political partisanship, other than to reiterate the government's own words about defence being an engine of growth. The inertia which has gripped the government since it came to office in July 2024, as far as defence policy is concerned, has been well chronicled. It would seem that this frustration is shared by many.

The incremental announcements about equipment purchases by the MOD that have been wrung out of the government, along with the signing of security agreements with allies, is little short of performative window dressing. However, the current leadership process resolves itself, the 'new' prime minister – even if it is the present incumbent – must bring forward the Defence Investment Plan, and get a grip on the Treasury, to be more creative about how to fund the defence needs of the UK.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for a national conversation about the place of Defence (with a capital D) in our society. Perhaps the 'new' prime minister can rediscover this, as well as suggesting that the sector offers employment and training opportunities for the growing number of NEETs across the country. In public policy it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil, so ministers and others must not rest on their laurels, once they have delivered their keynote speech, they need to keep the ball bouncing. That also applies to others who are able to use their voices, or their platforms, to spread the word. Commentary will continue to do its bit....

AUKUS

In April the House of Commons Defence Select Committee (HCDG) published a report looking at progress with the trilateral defence and security partnership AUKUS, which was first

announced in September 2021, almost five years ago. The report looks into how this new alliance is progressing. It is worth reiterating both the ambition of the AUKUS partnership, and the time scale involved. It is the creation of a nuclear submarine industry in Australia, which will enable a credible capability in the face of increasing Chinese encroachment into the Indo-Pacific region.

Commentary readers may be able to predict some of the observations made by the HCDC regarding the importance of the continuing commitment of the UK government to this partnership. Having overcome some scepticism by the Trump regime, AUKUS now has the backing of the US government, as well as Australian support. The tardiness of the UK government, however, is a cause for concern.

This is worrying, as with the related Tempest programme – the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) 6th generation fighter for the RAF and allies, the UK is the partner that seems to be dragging its heels. Both programmes embody the challenges that the defence sector faces, how to deliver credible capability at pace as other countries, both friendly and hostile, are doing so. On the industrial level both programmes represent opportunities for partnerships to engage with the challenge and the threat of AI and quantum computing.

In both cases, penny pinching is not the answer, and the Treasury should be looking at the opportunity that both AUKUS and Tempest represent, to create a defence sector that will be at the forefront of design and technology well into the twenty first century.

Regarding AUKUS, the Royal navy recently despatched HMS Anson to Australia, as part of the Pillar one element of the AUKUS programme, at the very moment that events in the straits of Hormuz put the availability of RN warships under a harsh spotlight. This will be the topic for another Commentary. But the need to sustain a cohort of service personnel who acquire the experience of working together, will mean that the RN must embed cross-training at an early stage in the careers of officers and ratings. As with the NATO Alliance, the value of cross posting to other countries' armed forces pays dividends over time.

Pillar Two

On the industrial level, Pillar two represents the Trilateral development of the advanced

technologies that will shape the capability needed; cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and undersea capabilities. Pillar two now embraces a total of eight workstreams including information sharing, innovation, hypersonic capabilities and electronic warfare.

A project of this size, the HCDC concludes, requires a top level champion, and a whole of government approach, if the benefits for the wider UK economy are to be realized. Sir Stephen Lovegrove, a former national security advisor and PUS at the MOD, serves as the prime minister's special representative on AUKUS. Not only must he advocate the UK's position with our allies, but he must also make the case across Whitehall. Only by invoking the authority of the prime minister will the machinery of central government grind into action,

The MOD expects 21,000 people will be involved in work directly related to the AUKUS programme. In particular the workforce that will be needed in the nuclear sector, both civil and defence related, will need to increase by 40,000 to support AUKUS and the wider nuclear enterprise. Work is already underway on long lead items, particularly in the nuclear propulsion area. Commentary readers may be familiar with the problems that were encountered in the production of the Astute class submarines. It must be hoped that government and industry, as well as the education sector, can co-operate to ensure a steady stream of qualified personnel.

Export controls

The announcement that all parties in the AUKUS programme agree to lift restrictions on technology sharing removes a potential roadblock to progress with this project. The UK government has been criticised for being slow to capitalise on the opportunities represented by this significant development. The HCDC drew attention to the need for the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) to alert industry to the opportunities offered by membership of the AUKUS Authorized User Community (AUC).

Comment

The HCDC report gives the government credit for keeping the AUKUS show on the road but underscores the need for 'strong and visible political leadership' to avoid the machinery of government slowing momentum. Perhaps MOD ministers can be persuaded to pick up the baton whilst a decision about the next prime minister wends its way through the Party

leadership process?

RIAT

The cancellation of this year's Royal International Air Tattoo at Fairford will disappoint many, as it is a great occasion and a chance to network with senior government ministers and military staff. More importantly, the cancellation will affect the work of the RAF Charitable Trust, who organise the event. The RAFCT plays an important role in inspiring the next generation of aviators and opens the eyes of many young people to the possibility of a career in the aerospace sector. We must all earnestly hope that RIAT will return next year, with renewed lift!

Julian Nettlefold

Many Commentary readers will be saddened to learn of the death of Julian Nettlefold. He was a well-known figure in the defence media world. Best described as a force of nature, he is now at peace, with Harry.

NPW 28 05 26

Nick Watts

07714 246478

nwatts@nwatts.co.uk

<https://www.nwatts.co.uk>