

by Olivier Grouille

The FCS Manned Ground Vehicle Common Chassis, now abandoned following Robert Gates' latest defence spending review Olivier Grouille is Head of Land Operations and Capabilities Programme at RUSI. In this article he considers the state of the Future Rapid Effect System (FRES) after the recent announcement by the UK Secretary of State for Defence postponing and re-prioritising the programme.

In November 2008, the UK Secretary of State for Defence, John Hutton, announced the postponement of the Utility Variant (UV), the intended first batch of vehicles to be procured as part of the Future Rapid Effect System (FRES) programme, a

'family' of medium-weight vehicles that represent the cornerstone of British Army transformation efforts. FRES UV is the 'battlefield taxi' of the family. In addition, Hutton announced the prioritisation of the FRES Scout Variant ahead of UV. He cited current operational requirements and the £700M already spent on Protected Patrol Vehicles (PPVs) for troops in Afghanistan as justification for the delay.

The British Army is still expected to be able to conduct major combat operations, stabilisation operations and everything in between. The Army maintains that a balanced force, centred on a fleet of medium-weight armoured vehicles, is crucial in enabling it to conduct this spectrum of operations.

Such a 'golf bag' of capabilities would allow for a flexible response to the wide range of interventions for which the Army plans and which seem the most likely to occur during the coming decades. Yet we now find ourselves in the midst of the worst recession to hit the UK since 1945, with an already drastically unbalanced defence budget. Despite an allocation of £1Bn from the Treasury Reserve for the purchase of theatre-specific PPVs, MoD knows that it will have to repay part of this sum from its own budget, as well as address the looming maintenance and upgrade costs of the PPV fleet. This financial context calls the future of FRES, a £16Bn programme, into question.

Critics have been quick to sound its death knell. Such pronouncements are, however, premature – the requirement for a FRES-type capability remains, and its conceptual underpinnings are still sound. The current 'limbo' status of the programme and the demands of current operations present an opportunity for the MoD to break with the past, capitalise on the success of its recent short-term successes and embed a new policy for the procurement of armoured vehicles. More importantly, this presents an opportunity for the MoD to articulate this policy in a clear, unambiguous manner to industry, the Army, its sister services and allies and last, but by no means least, the British taxpayer.

Lessons From Across the Pond

April 2009 saw an announcement by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates of a significant restructuring of the Pentagon's spending, including the cancellation of the manned vehicle elements of the Future Combat Systems (FCS) programme, the cornerstone of US Army modernisation and the backbone of its tactical information network. This represents a major shift in focus, with spending now more balanced between equipping troops for the types of counter-insurgency campaigns they are currently fighting, and the possibility of a major inter-state 'conventional' war.

Gates' degree of honesty over misjudged requirements, the unbalanced defence budget and a clear message on spending priorities raised eyebrows in UK defence circles. John Hutton identified the need for a similar amount of self-scrutiny by UK Defence in a speech on 27 April, citing the need for a readjustment of technology and equipment to meet the demands of irregular warfare. Two key points from Gates' statement have direct relevance for the development of FRES. First, Gates' refutation of the concept that a fully networked force, with all the advantages in information superiority and the agility of manoeuvre this implies, can offset protection and survivability.

Secondly, Gates' dissatisfaction with the fact that FCS provided no scope for incorporation of the multi-billion dollar MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush-Protected) vehicle programme. MRAP has provided US forces with a fleet of tens of thousands of vehicles, which has successfully reduced casualties from IED attacks in both Iraq and Afghanistan and is beloved of US soldiers. Indeed, the most successful vehicle in the UK's PPV fleet is the Mastiff, a derivative of a US MRAP vehicle, whose production line was adapted to assist its UK allies.

Protection of a Networked Force

Tactical scenarios in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that networked forces can overwhelmingly defeat enemy forces in head-on conventional engagements. However, FRES was never intended to carry a bespoke network in the manner of FCS. The backbone of the British Army's tactical data network is the Bowman information system, already integrated into nearly every in-service vehicle, including the PPVs. The FCS network was envisaged to deliver a level of capability far beyond that of Bowman and as such reflected US emphasis on the 'bigbang' delivery of a 'network-centric' capability. In contrast, the more modest 'network-enabled' British approach relies on a number of programmes in addition to Bowman and FRES, due in equal measure to resource constraints and uniquely British Army attitudes to the networks, whereby they are viewed as enablers rather than revolutionary capabilities in themselves.

All this notwithstanding, painful lessons from both theatres demonstrate that insurgents can nonetheless inflict significant destructive capability through the extensive use of mines, explosively formed fragments (EFPs) and IEDs. Whilst no amount or type of armour can provide a perfect solution to protect against these threats, there is no doubt that an MRAP or a Mastiff stands a better chance of survival against an IED blast than an HMMWV or a Land Rover. This is especially true when IEDs are employed in conjunction with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms. Passive protection in the form of vehicle armour clearly counts. Yet this is nothing new – the need for extra armour and thus heavier FRES vehicles was recognised in

2004, when the requirement for air transportability by C-130 was officially dropped.

A spat of unfavourable headlines in the British press has added a political dimension to the need for more heavily-armoured vehicles and the perceived protection they provide troops. Adequate protection is now firmly ingrained in the public consciousness and remains high on the political agenda. When commanders on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan identified a need for protected mobility, PPVs were available off-the shelf at a time when FRES UV was still on the drawing board. If UV is to provide the backbone of the FRES family, constituting 60% of the total fleet numbers and 50% of the programme costs, then logically it would be the first to be procured and thus represent the standard for the areas of commonality (notably in terms of chassis, power train and protection system) mandated for subsequent variants.

Yet the Army simply cannot afford, financially or politically, to buy FRES UV first. It is precisely the articulation of the difference between a PPV and a FRES UV that poses defence officials and procurement executives the greatest difficulty. Both are designed to carry between six and eight men, both are designed to protect to the greatest degree possible against the range of threats found on today's battlefields, and both prioritise this protection over the low profile of a Land Rover. Expert military views beyond these terms do not register with either the mainstream British press or the electorate.

Put simply, taxpayers' funds have been diverted from the Treasury Reserve to equip troops with the latest generation of armoured vehicles to protect them on current operations. In the public eye at least, the allocation of £700M of funding for armoured vehicles for operations in Afghanistan seems to heed the cry of "delivering kit to the boys under fire".

With limited financial resources and the ever-increasing pressure on public spending, the Government seems unwilling to invest the additional amount of political capital necessary for the prioritisation of a FRES variant that is simply not central to winning the tactical battle in Afghanistan.

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