by Olivier Grouille

What's Left to Come?

Even an observer not acquainted with the more esoteric elements of the Medium Weight Capability debate can understand the need for a long-term replacement for the Army's ageing 1960s' vehicle fleet. Despite a raft of impressive UOR-funded upgrades, vehicles such as FV430 clearly belong to an era with no demands for extensive systems engineering upgrades or digitisation, and are at a point where the complexity of further enhancements is no longer cost-effective when compared with the cost of buying a new vehicle. They clearly need replacing.

Moreover, as the Army moves ever closer to a force structure of homogenous brigades that contain an organic balance of heavy, medium and light capabilities optimised for both interventions and stabilisation operations, a prioritised FRES shopping list becomes potentially much clearer. Latest comments by the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, suggest a brigade structure of six battalions, and matching these to the Army's current fleet would present a structure along these lines:

1 x Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment, equipped with CVR(T).

1 x Armoured Regiment equipped with Challenger 2.

1 x Armoured Infantry battalion equipped with Warrior.

1 x Mechanised Infantry battalion equipped with Bulldog.

2 x Light Infantry battalions equipped with a mix of lighter vehicles.

MoD's priority of equipping forces for current operations suggests that FRES variants that address well-known needs and capability gaps will receive priority. A key question, however, is to what extent they will be developed and procured under the auspices of a restructured FRES programme, and whether the UOR process might be used to accelerate key elements of the acquisition process. The answers are surely harbingers of future UK MoD armoured vehicle acquisition strategy, with all the connotations for Through Life Capability Management (TLCM), whole-fleet management and the supply chain that this implies.

FRES Scout, the reconnaissance vehicle to replace the tired CVR(T), has already been announced as a priority by John Hutton and will be the first of the Specialist Variants (SV) to arrive. The funding mechanism for this variant is of particular note when recalling previous commitments to procure a common turret for FRES Scout and the upgraded Warrior. The timing

of the announcement to prioritise funding for the Warrior Capability Sustainment Programme to coincide with the latest statement on FRES would suggest that this is indeed the case. Further SV units such as recovery, surveillance and command post vehicles are likely to be next in line.

The British Army has not deployed – and does not plan to deploy – Challenger 2 tanks to Afghanistan. Yet the Canadians and Danish Army contingents have both sent their Leopard 2 Main Battle Tanks. Canada in particular has invested considerable money and effort in training and equipping tank crews to support operations in Southern Afghanistan. Given that the combination of firepower, mobility, protection and psychological intimidation provided by Main Battle Tanks have proven their worth in Afghanistan, a case could be made for the timely introduction of FRES Direct Fire (DF). The long-term validity of a DF variant is provided by a concept of operations in the urban environment, as Challenger 2 is not required to be optimised for fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA). Fielding of subsequent variants such as the Basic Capability Unit will likely depend on the ultimate fate of the PPV fleet, whilst the Manoeuvre Support variant will partially be grown from the in-service Armoured Engineer Tractor, Terrier.

It's FRES Jim, But Not as We Know It

So, is FRES dead? It would appear not. At the very least, the Army requirement for a family of medium-weight vehicles still draws breath. If 30 years of attempts to procure a fleet of armoured vehicles with large degrees of commonality have failed, then surely now is the time to stop and take a long, hard look at what the Army really needs, what it can afford and in what order. The spectacular success of Warrior Capability Sustainment Programme will see the 'backbone of the British Army' in-service well into the 2020s and at the cutting edge of capability throughout this time. The secret? A firm decision on vehicle design based on the contemporary threat environment, and explicit recognition that upgrades and enhancements would be needed on a theatre-by-theatre basis.

The name FRES is now politically charged and has attracted the attention and frequent criticism of the House of Commons Defence Committee. Despite the level of opprobrium attached to the name, it is likely to stick for PR reasons and to enable officials to underscore the ultimate validity of the programme when the first FRES vehicle eventually rolls off the production line.

Only time will tell to what extent the vehicles that emerge under the auspices of a programme called FRES match the original specifications. The resultant change in programme structure, priorities, requirements, contracts, costs and ultimately capability could herald a new dawn for armoured vehicle strategy in the UK. Opportunity knocks, not least for the announcement of a clear way forward.

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