

The Core conundrum

The MoD must move with the times and reassess the capability management strategy for UK land forces, urges Araldo Ltd Director John Reeve...

The campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in the procurement of significant new capabilities for UK forces operating in the land environment. Traditional capabilities born out of Cold War requirements, such as tanks, tracked armoured personnel carriers and unprotected utility vehicles, have found themselves all but redundant as protected mobility fleets have come to the fore. Other capabilities such as logistic aircraft and support helicopters have remained highly relevant, but only with the addition of expensive night navigation systems and defensive aid suites. Logistic vehicles, weapons systems, night vision devices, clothing and personal protection equipment have all been transformed.

By and large, these capabilities and their funding have been delivered outside the Defence Core programme, and as operations draw down, their integration into it presents a significant challenge. The problem is exacerbated by a squeeze on funding, reorganisation at multiple levels within the army and across the MoD and decision-making processes that have not yet been optimised for the future requirements of defence.

The cost of military capability has been driven up by the innovation of our enemies and the ever-increasing number of technological solutions to it. The army is generally good at identifying its requirements and industry is skilled in finding the solution, but the capability management challenge for the department will be to understand a complex value for money equation. This is particularly difficult given that the safety of soldiers is at stake, but the pot of money is finite, and so the relative contribution of a capability for a given financial outlay must be assessed in this context. Recent additions to the operational capability portfolio will be competing with the mature support funding lines of existing core equipment – the status quo cannot be allowed to prevail if we are to invest in those capabilities that deliver most.

Organisation is inextricably linked to equipment in the delivery of capability. Some of the drivers for organisational change, such as headcount reduction, relocation of headquarters, closure of depot facilities, industrial lay-offs, and the Defence Acquisition Change Programme, are delivering effect now and so capability planners are already aiming at a moving target. Time to influence the debate is short and the risk of not doing so is that the moment to make the best decisions will pass. The stakeholders need to pull together quickly and start making good decisions now.

The traditional planning round process for decision-making is cumbersome, flawed and inappropriate for the current situation. The UOR procurement decisions have all been made outside the normal planning cycle and the army has never been better equipped. Tinkering around the edges is not what is required – the army has a formal capability plan based on Cold War requirements and doctrine, and the shadow capability plan with which it is prosecuting the war in Afghanistan. These two need to be meshed into a single coherent plan and that amounts to a seismic shift in capability management strategy.

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If the MoD is to rise to the challenge, it must decide what it wants the army’s capability to be and in development of its vision must throw off the shackles of: stale thinking about infrastructure and organisation, which was developed to support the British Army of the Rhine; unrealistic (and unaffordable) aspiration; cows once thought to be sacred; and strategic paralysis through over-detailed analysis of the arbitrary or irrelevant. Having made sense of the strategic factors, it then needs to review all its capabilities, ruthlessly prioritising allocation of funding and resources to those that deliver, whilst culling those that consume money with marginal return. Funding will, of course, be insufficient to cover every base and so all capabilities must be managed to maintain the seed corn, allow sufficient training for the army to maintain its edge and to enable rapid force generation when the situation demands it. The processes and organisation required to deliver this will be far from what the department is used to. Given the scale of the challenge and lack of a blueprint, now is a time for clear thinking, good judgement, sound decision-making and strong leadership. Sounds familiar.

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