Is British Defence Policy and Posture fit for purpose in 2017?

Introduction

Much discussion has taken place between commentators, industry experts, politicians and news organisations alike surrounding Britain’s Defence Policy and Posture, however the time has come to assess whether resources match objectives? With ambitious foreign policy expectations, comes increased pressure on Defence policy and the means to project power. To many commentators, the notion of the UK being a ‘Tier 1’ power is fading fast. Why? Namely because of a lack of planning, readiness and most importantly funding. Successive governments must take the blame for a lack of provision for the Armed Forces, moreover, immediately review the UK’s capabilities vis-à-vis Defence.

Keep it simple

Brexit, Syria and the wider Middle East represent opportunities for the UK to get is Defence in order. Britain, despite numerous defence partnerships, will have to inevitably cough up more hard cash for Defence so as to match the UK’s foreign policy ambitions. The UK has lived off its reputation of being a top Defence player as it were, but crunch time is fast approaching. Too much penny pinching is harming the UK’s long term ability to project force and that cannot be acceptable politically. Moreover, it is becoming evident from a Foreign policy objective that the UK does not have the clout it once did.

What happened?

The UK’s Defence capabilities have been eroded substantially this past decade or more, with manpower reductions which have greatly reduced operational capabilities. Moreover, hardware has in a lot of instances being sold off, scrapped and not replaced. When one looks at the UK armour capabilities, we see that there is no replacement for Challenger 2, Warrior, Scimitar to name but a few vehicle types. We see the same with the Royal Navy, Type 22 ships not replaced, Type 23 not replaced in their original numbers, Type 42 not replaced in sufficient numbers, the list could go on. The RAF the same has seen vast squadrons of Tornado, Jaguar, Nimrod, Canberra discarded with little notion of replacement.

What is the UK’s posture?

Difficult to determine say most commentators, as it is suggested by some, that the UK struggled to field 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, some wonder what would happen if the same requirement emerged in the near future say in Syria for example, would the UK be able to deploy in sufficient numbers and strength to have an impact? The UKNDA thinks the answer would be ‘No’ unfortunately. Without substantial investment in capital and resource departments, the UK’s Armed Forces would not be able to mount any credible intervention as they stand. In fact some have suggested, doing so might actually be more dangerous than useful.

What to do?

The UKNDA has long campaigned for the Armed Forces, moreover, as an organisation, UKNDA believes that defence spending should be increased as a percentage of GDP. Some commentators have suggested a figure of 3% some have suggested 2.5% others believe we should keep in line with the Americans and lead by example. Either way the Prime Minister of the UK is the one who has to decide where to spend the UK’s hard earned cash. But to deny the MoD and Defence more funds at a time of great uncertainty is tantamount to neglect at best, at worst poor leadership.

Is there anything left in the tank?

No. Unfortunately not. The UK’s Armed Forces have been told they face a decade of cuts and funding shortfalls, moreover, that our debt interest repayment now exceeds defence spending in its entirety. To some commentators this is causing serious concern in the Defence community, particularly as the mantra of ‘do more with less’ was first muted back with ‘Options for Change’ in the mid 1990s. This policy direction represents a clear and present threat to the UK’s Defence posture, moreover, undermines any attempts to improve relations with nations around the world in foreign policy terms as the UK according to some is now being perceived as ‘weak’.

Is the equipment fit for purpose?

In some instances yes, in others no. If we consider that the Middle East is in a total mess and in all likelihood, should a UN resolution be approved, authorising peace keepers and intervention, the UK could be called upon to assist our friends and allies in the region. There is a clear requirement for further investment in air conditioned vehicles, new armoured vehicles, transport and attack helicopters all for desert warfare and these are required prior to any operation. One of the main criticisms of previous campaigns is that new equipment took far too long to get into theatre, let alone for troops to practice with in the first instance.

What should our politicians do?

Seriously re-assess the UK’s Defence needs and requirements, match funding accordingly and start by planning and anticipating future interventions, where required by the UN. All too often the UK has been caught at last minute with little opportunity to prepare, train and adapt. Let us hope that our politicians will take the opportunity with Brexit to launch a new SDSR specifically taking into consideration the above.

Conclusion

The UK’s Defence Policy and Posture is/ are not fit for purpose in 2017, however, there is the opportunity to review and improve that situation, should the government choose to. However, time is fast running out for the UK to do so and cost cutting for the sake of saving money elsewhere for the Treasury is no longer acceptable.