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From the FRES-UV to the MIV: observers challenge program management

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USPA NEWS - The story of the replacement program for the British Army's Mechanized Infantry Vehicle (MIV) is a long and twisted one. After much hesitation, and many wasted moves, the saga is slowly coming to an end, with the outlines of a decision beginning to appear. But the Secretary of Defence's leaning towards the German Boxer vehicle does little to dispel the confusion in the matter.

Still most of the equipment, in developed armies, dates to the cold war era, and has not aged particularly well, facing the new types of threats which have emerged in the past 15 years. Because armament programs stretch over decades, there can often be a gap between the environment they were designed for and the threats they will be facing, ten or twenty years later when they roll out factories.

One of the most potent examples today are main battle tanks, such as the American Abrams, the British Challenger or the German Leopard, which were all designed for conventional warfare in Central Europe, facing the fearsome Soviet T-tanks. The least one can say is that few of them ever faced the enemy they were built for.

The same goes for British MIVs which are in dire need of replacement, both due to their age and to the fact that they are no longer fit for modern warfare. The old enemy was massive, powerful, slow, and at our gates. The new enemy is mobile, elusive, nimble and keeps popping out of nowhere, all over the globe. A task old-generation MIVs, such as the 1970s FV-432 and the 1960s Bulldog are simply unable to cope with. Daily Star Joe Hinton interviewed military staff members as saying about their MIVs' performance in current battlefields: "They broke down all the time and were pretty ineffective against IEDs. The thought of this heap of scrap being with the Army for another 15 years is frightening." Hence the replacement program.

The replacement program started off badly and went downhill from there. After initially considering the purchase of the German-Dutch Boxer, in the 1990s, while it was still in the design phase, the British went all in and outright decided to join the program. By changing from future client to co-designer, the British hoped to make the vehicle more adapted to their specific needs. Rapidly, however, the cooperation went awry, and the British pulled out for want of an even more specific MIV, perfectly tailored to British use. The so-called developmental option took the form of the FRES-UV program (Future Rapid Effect System), an 8x8 armoured infantry vehicle, designed for increased mobility and projectability. However, in a disastrous combination of budget shortfall, poor program management and lack of coordination, the FRES program was terminated, causing a large-scale political scandal. Sean Rayment covered the matter for the Telegraph and quoted a senior Ministry of Defence source as saying: "FRES is dead in the water. It's a dead duck. It is the definition of everything that is wrong with the MoD's procurement process."

Many years later, the need for the new vehicle being more pressing than ever, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson chose the solution of buying the German Artec Boxer off-the-shelf, the very program the United Kingdom had previously abandoned. The Ministry of Defence published a release, stating: "The Army intends to make an initial purchase of over 500 Boxer vehicles, and the Defence Minister has today announced that British suppliers have been given the green light to bring forward concrete plans for the project". The choice leaves many puzzled, both in the way it was operated, and in the selected vehicle.

The standard way to proceed, in the case of such large-scale acquisitions, is a systematic request for proposals, which Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson simply cancelled in favour of the Artec Boxer. Not sure that Major-General, Robert Talbot Ric, head of Directorate of Land Equipment of Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S) was delighted to hear that. Such an unusual decision could be understood, if there were a large gap between capacities, in what the market had to offer. But the Boxer lies in the same category as the Swiss Piranha or the French VBCI - and doesn't compare all that well. It is the heaviest vehicle in its category, which will considerably hamper its deployments, be they by air or sea. Its unique design, with a removable payload container, will enable a lot of modularity, but comes at a price of increased fragility - which may prove a complication in today's battle scenery, where logistics lines are often overstretched, and vehicles must rely on their own robustness.

Finally, the biggest flaw for the Artec Boxer is that, regardless of its fine German engineering, it is not battle-proven. The current

military era of constant asymmetric warfare is very recent, in terms of military history, and soldiers must have absolute trust in the equipment they are using. A new type of platform in a new environment, is a shaky setting in any soldier's mind, as confirmed by Brigadier Narendra Kumar, who considers the "most daunting task is to adapt to the changing character of warfare and since no major conventional conflict has taken place as a result full impact of evolutionary and revolutionary changes over the past few decades in warfighting still remains beyond assessment." [?]

It must be stressed that the choice of the Boxer is only based on rumours, albeit persistent in the military world, and is yet to be confirmed by Gavin Williamson. If the rumour is found out to be true, there will be just as much speculation as to the reasons behind the decision. Is England trying to cosy up to Germany, in view of future European negotiations? Is the Ministry of Defence simply fed up with the entire MIV dossier? Additional perspective should arrive within coming months.

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