



Gavin Williamson the Secretary of State for Defence managed a small triumph in delivering his statement on the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) writes Sentinel, Our Man at the North Door. His statement was based on three themes: Modernise, Mobilise and Transform. These represent the way in which the MOD needs to move beyond the 2015 SDSR, which must seem like a long time ago. The inertia inherent in any large Whitehall department cannot act as a drag on the country's armed forces, when potential adversaries, unfettered by the inconvenience of democratic accountability, seek to steal a march on the west.

The MDP was launched at the beginning of the year. On entering office, Gavin Williamson recognised that the National Security and Capability Review (NSCR) was going in the wrong direction for MOD. It was having to consider cuts to military capability, at a time when the UK was anxious to be seen as a reliable partner by allies, particularly the US. Repeated comments by senior US military figures and policy makers, did nothing to affirm the UK's status as a Tier 1 military power, so Williamson was under pressure to change the narrative.

MDP was the response, as a way of removing the MOD from the NSCR. Among other conversations Williamson needed to have, was to re-state to the prime minister the reason that the UK wishes to retain Tier 1 capability; a full spectrum capability. He was also able to secure an interim tranche of funding in the October budget. It must be hoped that he can continue this

trend during the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2019. The challenges of implementing the ambitious Equipment Programme remain, as the National Audit Office (NAO) highlighted in November.

Whilst the headlines may dwell on the additional £ 1.8 bn investment in Defence, Williamson mentioned in passing that the MOD will re-prioritise the current defence programme, to increase weapon stockpiles. This is a necessary pre-requisite for the UK to be able to respond to a surprise attack into NATO territory, or other contingencies which might arise. This is a reflection of how the international scene has changed since the 2015 SDSR.

Typically, the Defence Innovation Fund comes in several tranches. Next year the £ 160 million fund will be ring-fenced within the defence budget. Williamson hopes to secure an additional £ 340 million via the Comprehensive Spending Review. Perhaps the Chancellor recalls being on the other side of the argument when he was at the MOD, because the Treasury still doesn't trust the MOD with unfettered access to public funds.

Williamson made much of the investment in innovative technology, which will be a vote of confidence in the UK's world class defence industries. It is also a necessary move, to counter the steps being taken by, among others, Russia and China, both of whom have multi-year investment programmes in new technology. He also recognised the role played by the men and women in the armed forces. They deserve the best equipment available, and in a timely manner. If the UK is to be a reliable partner and ally, the MDP will need to become a recurring event, alongside the formal SDSR, as technology continues to evolve.