4.5.2.13

July 2014

Dear Rory,

Thank you for your letter of 1 July requesting an update on the Air ISTAR Optimisation Study (AIOS) and other maritime surveillance matters. I have set out in the attached Annex the key developments since the update provided in July 2013 and responses to the specific questions you raised in your letter.

AIOS is designed to inform decisions on how future Air ISTAR capability, including MPA, could be delivered. The study is ongoing and activity in the coming months will involve a further stage, which will include establishing a greater understanding of future technologies; identifying options for the mitigation of current maritime surveillance capability gaps, particularly Maritime wide area surveillance; examining requirements for Air command and control beyond 2025; and understanding how to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of our Intelligence Direct, Process and Disseminate capability.

Last year, the Committee was provided with a classified report on the AIOS initial findings and a classified update will be provided after the summer recess. I suggest that an oral briefing is deferred until the AIOS has concluded, which is expected to be at the end of March 2015.

I also appreciate the Committee’s interest in the National Strategy for Maritime Security (NSMS) and my officials look forward to briefing the Committee on this separate subject later in the year. Given the cross-government nature of maritime security strategy, policy and activity, I have asked that officials from other departments are also present at the briefing to explain the cross-government nature of the production of the NSMS and its subsequent governance.

Yours sincerely,

THE RT HON PHILIP HAMMOND MP

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MARITIME SURVEILLANCE UPDATE

Findings from the second stage of the Aios

1. Aios is one of a number of ongoing strands of analysis that will contribute to SDSR15, rather than a stand-alone study. The purpose of the Aios work, therefore, is to provide the underpinning evidence to inform the strategic balance of investment decisions.

2. The Government's previous submission to the HCDC on the Aios reflected its first six months of work and made a number of observations relating to the potential use for surface surveillance missions of Multi Mission Aircraft (MMA) and Unmanned Aircraft Systems. Aios has already identified key risks, prioritised capability gaps against a range of policy-driven scenarios, and conducted an initial assessment of potential solutions to those gaps. These include a range of multi-mission concepts which seek to combine a number of capabilities in a single platform type.

3. The second stage of activity, which has taken place over the past nine months, has focussed on the feasibility and cost of an MMA by considering both short term solutions and those that may become available in the next decade.

4. Detailed Air ISTAR force mix analysis from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory has been combined with input and judgements from subject matter experts and senior military officers. The study has determined that, although the Land Wide Area Surveillance (WAS) risk was mitigated until 2018 through decisions in the last departmental planning round, there remain significant capability issues to address in Land and Maritime Surface and Sub-Surface WAS to 2030 and beyond. In addition, we need to consider Air Surveillance and Air Command and Control capabilities beyond 2025, as the SENTRY aircraft reaches the end of its expected service life.

5. The Committee has expressed an interest in whether any new MPA would be intended as a short or long term solution to the capability gap. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that there are a number of technologies which are likely to mature around 2025 that could provide more flexible future force mix options, possibly at a significantly reduced cost. Many of these capabilities are currently in the concept or pre-concept phase of development; they include platforms which would provide ultra persistence in flight, the ability to process data away from the actual aircraft, and the use of space-based technologies. These considerations, as well as the scheduled out of service date of SENTRY in 2025, would influence the intended service life of any new MPA. However, no firm choices have yet been made.

6. The Committee has also sought details of the criteria that would be used to judge which MPA should be purchased. Further work is planned in the coming months to
take the prioritised capability gaps identified by the ATOS and develop them into a defined requirement against which a potential MPA solution, amongst other Air ISTAR capability requirements, could be assessed.

7. Finally, the Committee wishes to understand what measures have been taken to mitigate the capability gap in response to recent global events. ATOS is designed to inform decisions on how future Air ISTAR capability, including MPA, could be delivered. At this stage, no decisions have been taken. The capability shortfalls identified by the ATOS reflect an up-to-date assessment of risks; these will be addressed in more detail in the classified update. Recent events have also brought long range search and rescue into the spotlight and, although the Committee is well aware that this is the responsibility of the Department for Transport, we nonetheless intend to use the arrangements established under the NSMS to ensure that cross-government requirements are fully understood as part of the development of any future MPA capability.

Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) Seedcorn Initiative

8. The MPA 'Seedcorn' initiative, the purpose of which was explained in the Government's report to the HCDC in July 2013, is continuing. Some 32 RAF operators are embedded in the US, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand MPA fleets. This will mitigate the lead time taken to establish a suitably qualified and experienced cadre if there is a future requirement to regenerate a UK MPA capability. Since the Government's previous updates, Seedcorn personnel involved with the US P-8A programme have been singled out for praise by the US Navy for bringing invaluable experience and expertise into the training and operational testing and evaluation processes. They have also played a significant role in helping the US Navy achieve an initial operating capability for its P8-A aircraft in November 2013. As part of their normal US Navy P-8A squadron duties, Seedcorn personnel have been selected to assist with the operational testing of the US Navy MQ-4 Triton Remotely Piloted Air System programme. Seedcorn personnel embedded in the Australian and New Zealand fleets were also involved in the search for the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. The Seedcorn initiative is currently scheduled to end in 2016 but the RAF is examining the feasibility of extending the programme beyond that point.

9. The Committee has expressed a wish to understand the steps we are taking to ensure interoperability between the Services and with allies. The Seedcorn programme will ensure that we have a cadre of personnel familiar with the MPA capabilities operated by some of our key allies. We currently draw on coalition support where appropriate as part of our current, layered, Anti-Submarine warfare capability which also employs a combination of Naval assets, specifically Type 23 frigates and Merlin helicopters. It will be critical to ensure that any RAF operated aircraft can operate with allies and the other Services; our experience with allies is providing valuable information that will be used to ensure this can be achieved.
CROWSNEST

10. The Government’s previous submission provided an update on CROWSNEST, a future Surveillance and Battle Management capability for the Royal Navy which will operate in a joint or coalition networked environment. It is due to achieve Initial Operating Capability in 2018, and will enhance the delivery of military effect from, and protection of, Carrier Strike and Littoral Maneuvre operations. The system will be able to deploy world-wide and operate from sea or land. CROWSNEST will replace the capability currently provided by the Sea King Mk7 Airborne Surveillance and Control (SKASaC) aircraft which has been a key joint ISTAR asset in Afghanistan and has now been extended in service until September 2018. This capability will provide force protection for Maritime Task Groups (most critically Airborne Early Warning), contribute to layered wide area surveillance in both the maritime and land domains, and strike and close air support mission support. The CROWSNEST capability will be delivered as mission system equipment for installation into the Merlin Mk2 aircraft and, following Defence Board agreement, the programme has been accelerated and is planned, subject to approval, to enter service some 18 months earlier than originally envisaged. The programme is currently in the Assessment Phase, with two bidders competing to provide the mission system solution. The preferred mission system supplier will be selected in April 2015.

Search and Rescue (SAR)

11. SAR Provision to Cyprus: As the Government’s submission of July 2013 set out, SAR for the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus is currently provided by 84 Sqn, which is part of the Joint Forces Command and separate to the RAF SAR Force. The aircraft and engineering are provided through a contract with Cobham Aviation (previously Fli-helicopters), which comes to an end in 2017, with three one year extensions available. Work continues on the future helicopter requirements for British Forces in Cyprus and a competition to let a new contract will be run if this work confirms that there is an enduring requirement.

12. UK SAR Service: The transition of UK SAR delivery to the Department for Transport remains on track. The new service will be delivered by Bristow Helicopters Ltd under the Maritime Coastguard Agency. The first handover is due on 1 April 2015 with the final UK flights under the existing arrangements due to have taken place by 31 December 2015.

13. SAR Provision to the Falkland Islands: The delivery of SAR capability to the Falkland Islands by the UK military is due to be contractorised by 31 March 2016 under a separate contract to that for UK SAR delivery. A Defence Equipment and Support project team is currently conducting an Invitation to Negotiate for a combined SAR and Support Helicopter service in the Falkland Islands. Tenders have been received and are now being evaluated.