

NATO Flags Critical Gaps in UK F–35 Fighter Jet Capability

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The National Audit Office (NAO) has issued a stark warning regarding serious capability gaps in the United Kingdom's F–35B Lightning II programme. The report highlights concerns over weapon integration delays, low aircraft availability, infrastructure shortcomings, and a growing strain on skilled personnel, challenges that threaten the effective

deployment of the Royal Air Force's (RAF) most advanced combat aircraft.

The F-35B, designed with short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) capabilities, forms the cornerstone of the UK's future air power. However, the NAO warns that delays in integrating key UK-developed munitions, including the MBDA Meteor air-to-air missile and the SPEAR 3 (Selected Precision Effects At Range) precision strike weapon, have left the aircraft under-equipped. These weapons are not expected to become operational on the platform until the 2030s, significantly after the aircraft's initial entry into service.

The audit also found that, despite possessing 37 F-35Bs in service, the RAF has consistently fallen short of its target for flying hours and operational availability. The lack of trained maintenance engineers and supporting infrastructure has further hampered readiness. Compounding the issue is the MOD's continued struggle to provide fully equipped operating bases and sufficient spare parts, factors that restrict the fleet's combat effectiveness.

In terms of value for money, the programme has already cost the Ministry of Defence (MOD) over £11 billion, with projected lifetime costs potentially reaching £71 billion. This figure significantly exceeds the MOD's previous budget forecasts and raises pressing questions about programme oversight and prioritisation.

From an industrial perspective, the UK remains a core partner in the global F-35 project, contributing around 15 per cent of each aircraft's production and securing more than £20 billion in domestic defence

contracts. While the platform's strategic value is not in doubt, its operational readiness remains far from optimal.

From a centre-right viewpoint, the report underscores the need for more disciplined defence planning and sharper programme execution. With rising global threats, from Eastern Europe to the Indo-Pacific, the UK cannot afford to field an underperforming flagship fighter. The MOD must act swiftly to bridge these gaps by accelerating weapons integration, improving infrastructure, and bolstering engineering recruitment.

In the current security climate, deterrence depends on capability, not just procurement. If the UK is to remain a credible military power within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), fixing these failings must become a top priority.