

UK to Acquire 12 Nuclear Capable F–35A Jets in Major Defence Shift

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The United Kingdom has confirmed plans to purchase twelve F–35A Lightning II aircraft capable of carrying U.S. B61 tactical nuclear bombs, marking the most significant change in its nuclear deterrence posture since the Cold War. The decision will reintroduce an airborne nuclear delivery capability for the Royal Air Force and formalise the UK's role in NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft mission.

Announced by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer at the NATO summit in The Hague, the F-35A aircraft will be based at RAF Marham and is part of a wider plan to eventually field up to 138 F-35s. The choice of the F-35A variant, which features conventional take-off and landing, over the short take-off F-35B used by the Royal Navy, is expected to deliver cost savings of around 25 per cent per unit. The move is also projected to support 20,000 jobs across the UK defence supply chain, with British companies contributing significantly to global production.

The aircraft will complement the UK's submarine-based Trident deterrent, restoring a dual nuclear strike capability not seen since the retirement of the WE.177 gravity bomb in the 1990s. Under NATO nuclear planning protocols, the use of these aircraft would require joint authorisation from both the UK Prime Minister and the President of the United States.

The move aligns with the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, which identified rising nuclear threats and reaffirmed the importance of a credible NATO-aligned deterrence strategy. Defence Secretary John Healey described the procurement as both a strategic necessity and a boost for Britain's defence industrial base.

From a centre-right standpoint, this decision reflects a pragmatic and forward-looking defence policy. It bolsters NATO cohesion, enhances UK defence capabilities, and promotes high-skilled employment in a strategically important sector. It also addresses long-standing concerns about the UK's over-reliance on submarine-based deterrence.

Nonetheless, the reintroduction of air-based nuclear delivery has drawn criticism from disarmament advocates. Some have expressed concerns that stationing U.S. nuclear weapons on British soil could escalate

geopolitical tensions, though the UK remains compliant with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and U.S. warheads will remain under American control.

The F—35A offers superior range and payload compared to the F—35B, improving operational flexibility. It also allows RAF Marham to focus on pilot conversion and training without drawing on the Royal Navy's carrier fleet. Looking ahead, the new aircraft could serve as a steppingstone toward integrating future technologies from the Global Combat Air Programme.

This procurement underscores the UK's renewed commitment to deterrence, sovereignty, and industrial capability, an approach consistent with sound strategic planning and centre-right values.