

UK's F-35 Combat Jet Programme Faces Major Readiness Shortfalls, Audit Finds

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A new report from the National Audit Office (NAO) has revealed that the UK's fleet of F-35B Lightning II jets is falling significantly behind its global peers in operational readiness. Key challenges include maintenance delays, weapons integration setbacks, and a critical shortfall in trained personnel.

The National Audit Office has warned that the United Kingdom is failing to meet core readiness targets for its fleet of F-35B Lightning II aircraft. Despite receiving nearly all of the 38 jets ordered to date, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has achieved only about one-third of its intended mission-capable readiness.

According to the report, the UK's F-35B fleet, used by both the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy, is underperforming in comparison with international counterparts. This includes the United States Marine Corps, which operates the same short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) variant with far greater availability and mission effectiveness.

The audit identifies a lack of trained engineers, slow parts supply, and substandard maintenance cycles as major contributing factors. At one point, the proportion of jets grounded for maintenance exceeded twice the rate seen elsewhere across the global F-35 fleet. In particular, corrosion issues, along with limited hangar infrastructure, have compounded delays.

The report also criticises the MoD for deferring the integration of key British-made munitions. Neither the MBDA Meteor long-range air-to-air missile nor the SPEAR 3 (Selective Precision Effects At Range) air-to-ground system is expected to be available until the 2030s. In the meantime, the jets rely on older laser-guided bombs, limiting their deterrent value in high-threat scenarios.

Although the MoD has already invested £11 billion in the programme, long-term costs are now projected to reach up to £71 billion, significantly exceeding initial expectations. However, the aircraft still offers substantial economic benefits to the UK, with British firms contributing to around

15% of each jet's manufacture and securing roughly £22 billion in contracts.

From a centre-right perspective, the report underscores the need for more than just capital expenditure. Without adequate support staff, proper infrastructure, and timely weapons integration, even the most advanced platforms risk becoming underused assets.

If Britain is to uphold its commitments within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and maintain a credible global defence posture, the government must urgently address these failings. A strategic shift toward operational readiness, not just acquisition, should be a top priority in the next defence review.