

Audit Finds UK F–35 Fleet Lagging Behind Global Standards in Readiness

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A new report from the National Audit Office (NAO) has revealed that the United Kingdom's fleet of Lockheed Martin F–35B Lightning II fighter jets is underperforming compared to the global standard, raising questions about defence preparedness. Despite possessing 38 aircraft, with 37 in service, the UK fleet managed only a third of its planned flying hours last

year, largely due to shortages in engineering personnel, spare parts, and appropriate maintenance infrastructure.

The F-35B is a fifth-generation stealth aircraft capable of short take-off and vertical landing, operated jointly by the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy. Although the platform itself remains unmatched in capability, the UK's ability to deploy it effectively has come under scrutiny. The audit showed the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has consistently missed key operational benchmarks, including a modest monthly flying-hour target of 7.5 per aircraft.

Compounding the issue, integration of British-made weapons such as the Meteor air-to-air missile and the SPEAR 3 precision strike weapon has been delayed until the 2030s. Full Operational Capability (FOC), initially expected to be achieved earlier, has now been postponed until the end of 2025. This leaves the fleet without its full strike capability, despite its high cost and strategic role.

The financial picture is equally concerning. The NAO reports that the MOD has already spent over £11 billion on the F-35 programme, with projected lifetime costs potentially reaching £71 billion, significantly more than the MOD's previous estimate of £18.76 billion. Much of the overspend relates to delays in infrastructure and maintenance readiness, as well as ongoing dependency on overseas supply chains for key components.

That said, the UK remains a major industrial contributor to the F-35 programme. British firms are responsible for around 15 per cent of the global supply chain, securing £22 billion in manufacturing contracts and supporting thousands of domestic jobs.

From a centre-right perspective, the audit highlights the urgent need for better defence resource management and logistical planning. While investment in next-generation military technology is essential, its value is only realised if backed by adequate support systems. Engineer recruitment, pilot training, spare parts provision, and weapons integration must be prioritised to ensure readiness.

In an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment, particularly with rising tensions across Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the UK must ensure its premier aircraft fleet meets operational demands, not only to meet NATO obligations but to maintain credible deterrence in a dangerous world.