Defence iQ

What the 2026 UK Defence Investment Plan Means for Combat Air

(All investment figures taken from the UK Ministry of Defence's Defence Investment Plan 2026 chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a44e989167a99cf0018da38/The_Defence_Investment_Plan.pdf)

£27.8 BILLION

Investment in UK air capabilities over the next four years (FY2026/27–FY2029/30)

Introduction

The 2026 UK Defence Investment Plan sets out how the Ministry of Defence intends to transform the Armed Forces following the Strategic Defence Review in 2025.

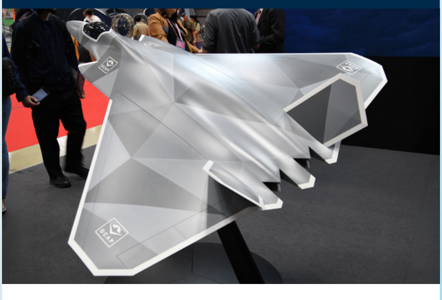
For combat air, the document makes one message clear:

Future airpower will be built around integration rather than individual aircraft.

Investment is being directed towards sixth-generation combat aircraft, autonomous systems, AI-enabled targeting, integrated air and missile defence, and digital integration – creating a more connected, multi-domain Royal Air Force.

KEY INVESTMENTS

GLOBAL COMBAT AIR PROGRAMME (GCAP)



Investment

£8.6 billion

Key commitments

- Sixth-generation combat aircraft
- Pathway towards Europe's first sixth-generation air force
- Partnership with Italy and Japan
- Strengthens allied interoperability

COLLABORATIVE COMBAT AIRCRAFT (CCA)

Investment

£300 million

Key commitments

- UK autonomous fighter jet programme
- Concept demonstrator flying by at least 2030
- Accelerate operational capability as quickly as possible
- Designed to operate alongside fourth and fifth-generation fighters

TYPHOON

New investment

Over £1.1 billion

Key commitments

- Sustain Typhoon into the 2040s
- Upgrade combat capability
- Support UK aerospace jobs
- Strengthen export opportunities

F-35

Investment

£2.2 billion

Key commitments

- Purchase additional F-35 aircraft
- Purchase the F-35A variant
- Join NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft nuclear mission
- Continue benefiting from substantial UK industrial workshare

Building the Integrated Force DIGITAL TARGETING WEB

Investment

£1.8 billion

The Defence Investment Plan places significant emphasis on creating a Digital Targeting Web capable of connecting:

- Sensors
- AI-enabled decision making
- Aircraft
- Weapons
- Every operational domain

Objective: Reduce the time between target detection and engagement through AI-enabled, software-defined warfare.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI underpins:

- GCAP
- Collaborative Combat Aircraft
- Project ASGARD
- Digital Targeting Web

The MOD identifies AI as a foundational technology across the future Integrated Force.

INTEGRATED AIR & MISSILE DEFENCE

Homeland IAMD investment

£790 million

Lessons from Ukraine and the Middle East have reinforced the importance of integrated air and missile defence.

The Defence Investment Plan funds:

- New Integrated Air, Space & Missile Defence Operations Centre
- New command-and-control systems
- New radar and sensing capabilities

Related investments include:

- Expanded counter-drone capability
- Directed Energy Weapons
- Expansion of Sky Sabre

Typhoon, F-35 and future Collaborative Combat Aircraft are all expected to contribute to future UK Integrated Air & Missile Defence.

AIR AUTONOMY

The Defence Investment Plan allocates over £5 billion across autonomous systems.

Combat air-related programmes

Air-Launched Effects

£50 million

Novel payloads and swarms deployable from crewed and uncrewed aircraft.

Collaborative Combat Aircraft

£300 million

UK autonomous fighter demonstrator.

Future capability

Autonomous systems are intended to deliver:

- Greater combat mass
- Improved survivability
- Increased lethality
- Greater operational agility

INDUSTRY

Backing British Aerospace

The Plan links combat air investment directly to industrial growth.

It highlights:

- Over £1.1bn of new investment in Typhoon
- Additional F-35 procurement
- A refreshed Combat Air Strategy
- Significant export opportunities

The MOD positions combat air investment as both a defence priority and a driver of UK aerospace jobs, innovation and exports.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Future combat air capability will be developed through close cooperation with allies and NATO partners.

Highlighted programmes include:

- **GCAP**
- **Typhoon exports**
- **NATO Dual Capable Aircraft mission via F-35A**
- **Increased capability cooperation across NATO and key international partners**

AT A GLANCE

Air capability investment	£27.8bn
GCAP	£8.6bn
Typhoon (new investment)	£1.1bn+
F-35	£2.2bn
Collaborative Combat Aircraft	£300m
Digital Targeting Web	£1.8bn
Integrated Air & Missile Defence	£790m
Autonomous systems	£5bn+
Counter-drone capability	£750m+

INTERNATIONAL FIGHTER

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Join the Conversation at the International Fighter Conference 2026

The World's Leading Combat Aviation Conference

3–5 November 2026 | Eisbach Studios, Munich, Germany

The UK's Defence Investment Plan 2026 sets out a clear vision for the future of combat air - one built on sixth-generation aircraft, Collaborative Combat Aircraft, AI-enabled targeting, digital integration and allied interoperability.

These priorities will be explored in greater depth at Defence iQ's International Fighter Conference 2026, where military leaders, air force decision-makers and industry experts will examine how advanced fighters, CCAs, digital architectures and multinational collaboration are transforming the future of airpower.

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