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The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

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Introduction *Paul Cornish*

The culmination of a process begun just weeks after the 2024 General Election, the most recent UK Strategic Defence Review, published in June 2025, was described by the then Secretary of State for Defence as “the first root-and-branch review of UK Defence in 25 years”. A metaphorical forest of predictions and promises, SDR 2025 was fully and firmly endorsed by the Labour government led by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer; the SDR’s 62 recommendations were all accepted and would be implemented. SDR 2025 also made two other, critically important commitments that would characterise the new government’s approach to UK defence spending (or ‘investment’ as it became known, somewhat disingenuously). The first of these, echoing a commitment made by Starmer in February 2025, was to increase UK defence spending steadily to 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2027 and on to 3.0 per cent of GDP ‘in the next Parliament’ (qualified, as has become commonplace, by the evasive phrase ‘when fiscal and economic conditions allow’). The second commitment was to complete a new Defence Investment Plan (DIP) by Autumn 2025. In both cases, however, the promise has proved rather easier to make than to meet; suggesting that while the SDR ‘forest’ might display many branches, it might have too few roots to be sustainable.

After a puzzlingly long delay (having been formally completed in January 2026), the DIP was finally published on 30 June 2026, in the most melodramatic of circumstances. Publication came very soon after the 11 June resignation of the then Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey. In his letter of resignation Healey gave an unusually pointed explanation for his decision, asserting that Prime Minister Keir Starmer had shown himself to be ‘unable’, and the Treasury ‘unwilling’, to ‘commit the resources that the nation needs to defend the country at this time of rising threats.’ The DIP appeared under the signature of a replacement Secretary of State, Dan Jarvis, some three weeks before the resignation of Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Starmer was then replaced as Prime Minister by Andy Burnham who that day appointed a new Chancellor of the Exchequer – none other than John Healey. Intriguingly, the long-awaited DIP also introduced two new defence spending pledges to the debate: an increase to 2.7 per cent of GDP ‘by the end of the decade’ (i.e., by 2029/30) and a further increase to meet a new NATO pledge of 3.5 per cent of GDP by 2035; a ‘promise’ insisted the (interim) Secretary of State that ‘will be met’. But with the arrival of the summer, and with the new Prime Minister distracted by his move into both No. 10 Downing Street and ‘No. 10 North’, confusion mounted in some quarters (mainly media) as to whether the DIP promise of an additional £15 billion of defence spending would ever materialise, and from what source. It was reported that Treasury had ‘found’ just two thirds of the £15 billion, with little indication as to where the balance would come from, and by when. And the broader, longer-term pledge,

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

first made in the SDR, to be spending not merely 2.7 per cent of GDP on defence by 2030 (as indicated in the June 2026 DIP) but as much as 3.0 per cent also began to be presented less as a *commitment* and more as an *option* to be discussed (yet again) at a later date. It soon transpired that the ‘later date’ would be as late as the new Chancellor’s Spring 2027 spending review, at which ‘defence will be the number one priority’. It was perhaps predictable that on 28 August 2026, in an exclusive report in the *Financial Times* (online), it was revealed that the 3.0 per cent target had finally been put out of its misery: ‘Healey to shelve his own defence spending target of 3% of GDP by 2030.’ⁱ

Although much has been, and is, expected of the UK Defence Investment Plan, by summer 2026 the DIP appeared for some observers to have joined the walking dead of UK public policy; a simulacrum of life as we know it, with no discernible purpose and little by way of a predictable trajectory. The DIP was intended to be the finance arm of the otherwise laudable 2025 Strategic Defence Review. Yet within weeks of its publication it plainly become inadequate to the task that had been set for it. Rather than meet its many promises, the DIP has been paralysed by indecision; confusing and frustrating disappointment for many who take a close interest in UK defence policy and national strategy, including those who serve in the UK Armed Forces and who hoped for clarity and leadership from the new government, and those working (and investing) in defence industry, primes and supply chains, for whom commercial and contractual predictability is sorely needed. That said, there were some elements of the DIP that were received more favourably and optimistically than others, as this paper will demonstrate.

This briefing paper comprises a set of essays which, collectively, serve as a reference point; a reminder of what was expected of the (belated) June 2026 version of the Defence Investment Paper. Five essays cover, respectively, the Royal Navy, the British Army, the Royal Air Force, the Cyber and Information Command and UK defence industry. In each case, what were the shortfalls and aspirations, set out in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, that the DIP was and is intended to fill? Rather than follow a common template, the essays are separate assessments of the decisions and contributions expected of the Defence Investment Plan.

The Royal Navy *Peter Roberts*

Do not confuse enthusiasm with capability. The UK has determined that it cannot afford a capable Royal Navy – at least not in the traditional sense. For decades, the mantra of British military chiefs has been that fewer, more technologically capable, and more sophisticated platforms with smaller crews would suffice to meet the threats facing the UK, and on operations in which the UK would choose to fight. The balanced fleet was unaffordable when it was last imagined by Lord (George)

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

Robertson in 1998. It remains so today, perhaps more obviously still. The recapitalisation costs to provide the UK with a credible and capable naval force has been deemed too large. As a result, the 2026 Defence Investment Plan outlines a reimagined way of defending the UK, of deterring adversaries and appeasing allies.

Royal Navy chiefs are evangelising a brave new force design that could be – perhaps – affordable. It is a model that bets heavily on the potency and possibilities of AI and autonomy, an indication of the penetration technology companies have had on senior leaders. No other state has opted for a version of maritime operations that sets aside everything that is known about warfare at sea in favour of a bold future based on a combination of unproven technological promises and a selective assessment of operational lessons from Ukraine. That, of course, is not the whole story. For example, the use of AI and autonomy by US forces in Iran had disastrous consequences and did not deliver success across the campaign. And while some lessons from Ukraine certainly point to the possibilities of new technology, it remains the case that Ukraine is not divesting itself of traditional platforms, whether tanks, helicopters, fighter planes, or soldiers; indeed, Ukraine has been busy buying crewed ships. For navies everywhere else, maritime autonomous systems have been an addendum to traditional platforms rather than a replacement for them. Yet the Royal Navy has not allowed itself this option. The enthusiasm for the ‘hybrid’ navy concept put forward by political and military chiefs cannot be regarded as a capability that will deter or defeat adversaries with any certainty. It might work; the theory does appear to be sound. But we will not be sure of the outcome for at least a decade. The ‘hybrid navy’ idea is thus a gamble with UK national security that cannot be undone because warships take more than a decade to build. The skills to operate them take longer still to acquire.

In acknowledging that there is no other financially viable option, the details contained in the DIP are interesting as far as the Royal Navy is concerned. Placing large bets on autonomy and AI will effectively replace the surface fleet over a decade (funded by the early retirement of frigates and – probably – destroyers too; a reflection of the success of the autonomous mine-hunting programme, itself now finally funded to maturity. The UK’s aircraft carriers, however, are left without a considered role, and bereft of protection; no more carrier-capable jets appear to be on order. The focus of most investment is on the submarine branch, an area where the Royal Navy has historic expertise and where it can compete with Russia and other leading navies.

It is revealing that the submarine flotilla is not being pushed root and branch into an uncrewed enterprise. The realities of that environment and the impossibility of through water communication, refuelling issues, and the dynamics of water columns mean that in truly considering the risks of autonomy and AI, neither the UK’s nuclear

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

deterrent, nor the next generation hunter-killer submarines can be trusted into the hands of technology alone. It is revealing that when the mission really matters, a crew is deemed essential. Where technology is replacing humans, the inference is that the missions are less important. The hybrid navy – on the sea and in the air – is arguably therefore less important and expendable.

There are certain peculiarities within the DIP that should also be mentioned. Little naval effort is assigned to the protection of overseas territories, for example. Where deterrence was once deemed important, these commitments are now skipped over with a couple of lines of narrative but with no force allocation. Destroyers are seemingly allocated to both missile defence of UK military bases and to protecting force deployments made abroad (we can only hope they are in the same place when an attack occurs). No mention is made of a replacement for an aviation training ship, a forward repair ship, an ammunition ship, or an at-sea hospital/medical capability. These functions might be where the UK aircraft carrier platforms finally find some measure of utility. There is an underlying aspiration to make all naval aviation uncrewed (perhaps without understanding the realities of how aviation is used and what it achieves at sea), so it ought not to be a shock when the Royal Navy follows the British Army's example over the coming five years by retiring the entire Wildcat naval helicopter force to make the efficiency savings required to pay for the AI capability on which the 'hybrid' fleet depends.

Strangest of all is the narrative around the Royal Marines and the idea of rebuilding an amphibious capability. Readers may recall how the UK recently sold off all the amphibious ships that had been built over decades to form the core of a UK-Netherlands marine force for NATO. Aligned to these sales was a recasting of the RM Corps as providing small groups of determined men playing havoc behind enemy lines through small, discrete raids of disproportionate value. The DIP does not spell out the tasks for the Royal Marines but revisits the requirement for an amphibious capability, alongside the Netherlands. Again.

The DIP does little for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. This is the civilian part of the Royal Navy that provides sustainment and logistics for ships when they are deployed. It seems eminently possible that within a decade, if not sooner, the entire RFA enterprise will become contractor operated rather than a government function (Canada has also been pushing towards this model). Given the intransigence that successive political and military chiefs have shown towards demands from the RFA – who actually know and understand their business – a shift towards commercial contracting might be the only way to have a deployed Royal Navy adequately supported.



The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

There is some good news, however. The current frigate replacement programmes remain funded. Three floating submarine docks will be constructed. The naval bases at Faslane, Portsmouth, and Devonport will be refreshed and brought into the twentieth century. The munitions stockpile will finally be ordered, even though the UK will now sit at the rear of the substantial queue that has formed. F35 jets and P8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft will finally be able to fire a wider range of non-US manufactured weapons. And most importantly, the UK's nuclear warhead programme finally gets the priority it requires.

Technology, specifically AI and autonomy, offers huge potential to regain mass and scale, and to deliver on the missions that the Royal Navy fulfils. Yet no other state in the world considers those things mature enough to make the bet that the Royal Navy is placing. This is not a choice that anyone in uniform will have wanted to make. It is one driven by finance.

The tests of this new design for the Royal Navy will be two-fold. First, will this deter Russia? Second, will it appease NATO allies, and the US specifically? On deterring Russia, the hybrid force will have little impact. The submarine force may make a deeper impression on Russia but the UK's submarine-based deterrence of Russia will be determined by the Royal Navy's ability to get submarines to sea, something that has proved to be a struggle with the Astute class boats. The Kremlin will understand they have a window of opportunity until 2040, when the next generation of Britain's nuclear-powered submarines and the hypothetical hybrid navy might actually have the scale and credibility to change the cost-benefit calculus. On reassuring Allies and the US, Britain's new naval design will find an even harder audience to convince of its merits. As a US military chief said in 2019, virtual presence – whether drones or surveillance at range – means actual absence. As a nation, we can only hope that the enthusiasm for the hybrid model – underpinned by a submarine capability in 2040 – will be sufficient, because *hope* is what now describes the UK's national security strategy.

The British Army *Paul Cornish*

The 2025 Strategic Defence Review gives a revitalised British Army the task of supporting three UK defence and security roles: (1) defend, protect, and enhance the resilience of the UK, its Overseas Territories, and Crown Dependencies; (2) deter and defend in the Euro-Atlantic; and (3) shape the global security environment. The Army's contribution in these roles will involve an extensive reorganisation of commands, formations and functions; some familiar, some novel. UK Land Forces, as they are now to be known, will be responsible for 'for generating and preparing forces for current and contingency operations.' At the heart of this reorganisation will be two Army divisions, more or less traditionally configured, as well as a variety of

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

specialist activities (e.g., surveillance, intelligence and electro-magnetic) and commands (including units and sub-units of the UK Special Forces Directorate). The outline plan for the two divisions goes some way to explaining how the 2025 SDR saw the future of the British Army, doctrinally and operationally. The 1st UK Division is to be a light forces division of about 30,000 personnel, described as the UK's 'Global Response Division' with seven brigades deploying units of light armour, infantry, air assault, artillery, engineers, logistics and medical support. Its sister formation, the 3rd UK Division will be a heavy division of up to 20,000 personnel, described as the 'Iron Division' with deep recce-strike (more of which below) and armoured manoeuvre brigades deploying armour, infantry, artillery, engineer and logistics units, as well as air defence and signals.

As envisaged in the SDR, the UK will also continue to provide NATO with a functioning corps headquarters in the form of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) commanded by a British general and based in Gloucestershire. With command of the UK's 1st and 3rd Divisions, together with troops from elsewhere in NATO, the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps will form one of two NATO Strategic Reserve Corps. The second Strategic Reserve Corps is to be based on France's 1st Army Corps, to which the UK will also contribute troops.

To satisfy this lengthy list of roles, tasks, commitments and requirements, the SDR posits a British Army with a minimum troop strength of 100,000 (full-time and reserve), with the ability to 'rapidly expand and mobilise Reserve forces'. This new model Army will require a range of equipment and capabilities, some familiar, some novel: armoured platforms (reconnaissance vehicles, main battle tanks, armoured infantry vehicles, artillery, armoured engineers); attack helicopters; field engineers; intelligence, communications and medical support; and a logistics chain (fuel, ammunition, rations, repair) that is responsive and deployable. The Army will also require a comprehensive, repeatable training programme, with access to high quality training areas and facilities, to maintain its capability and credibility.

At the doctrinal level, the theory of change for the Army is to be more responsive in ideas, military doctrine and organisation, with an element of latency and interoperability built into the design, manufacture and deployment of vehicles and equipment. Army doctrine will conform to what the SDR describes as a 'new "Recce-Strike" approach' Recce-strike is essentially a restatement of what the British Army (and most other modern armies) has been trying to do for several decades, albeit supplemented by more accurate surveillance, more precise and longer range weaponry, and with very rapid, AI-assisted targeting which will collapse the targeting and attack decision cycle to the almost immediate. The SDR also advocates a 'dynamic "high-low" mix of capability', whereby the Army will seek a '20-40-40' mix

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

between crewed platforms (20%) controlling reusable platforms such as drones (40%) and consumables such as conventional munitions (40%). With an approximate target date of 2035, the SDR's projections for a restructured and re-equipped Army will, in effect, provide both a doctrinal and a practical bridge between legacy and emergent systems and challenges, while remaining open to the unfamiliar and unknown.

Firm in its endorsement of 'recce-strike', the Defence Investment Plan corresponds closely enough both with the Army's doctrinal outlook, and with the near-term, more practical priorities and ambitions of the SDR. Thus, the DIP speaks of 'substantial continued investment' in heavy armoured vehicles including the Challenger 3 Main Battle Tank; the Ajax family of Armoured Fighting Vehicles in six variants: the Boxer family of Mechanised Infantry Vehicle in four variants; and the RCH 155 wheeled artillery system (mounted on a Boxer chassis). A new, combined amphibious fleet will be 'explored' with the Netherlands; the size of the Regular Army (i.e., the full-time, professional force) will be increased to 76,000 by 2035; vehicles (including those mentioned above) will be assembled in the UK; heavy gun barrels will henceforth be made in the UK; the UK-based production of munitions will be increased 'substantially'; and the Army's new family of rifles, sniper rifles and machine guns will be acquired by the 2030s.

Readers of the DIP would, however, be mistaken if they interpreted this barrage of intended purchases as little more than an incoherent, 'something for everyone' list of procurement projects driven more by special pleading than by military logic. The SDR is driven by military logic, and there is method in it. The DIP duly refers to the SDR's promise of a 'new era for UK defence': 'our vision is that, by 2035, UK defence will be ... a leading tech-enabled defence power, with an Integrated Force that deters, fights and wins through constant innovation at wartime pace.' In the era of 'all-domain warfare', the DIP makes its case in reasonably accessible terms:

Lessons from Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East have reminded us that modern military success is not about individual platforms (like tanks or jets) but about how seamlessly those systems connect across every domain, maximising the benefits of autonomy and data. [DIP, p..24]

The overall digital integration of UK defence will be made possible by the DIP's promise to invest 'at least' £17bn in the Digital Backbone and the Digital Targeting Web between 2030 and 2035. For its part, the British Army will benefit from a

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

lengthy list of projects and initiatives such as autonomous drones (Project NYX), long range surveillance (Project CORVUS), uncrewed ground vehicles, a 'suite of inexpensive expendable autonomous systems', and a new medium helicopter. And at the heart of the Army's own contribution to the Integrated Force will be Project ASGARD, bringing together 'digital networks and data, AI, and intelligence capabilities with firepower to find and strike enemy forces at greater distances across the battlespace than ever before.' [DIP, p.43]

There are, however, questions to be asked about one or two of the ideas that appear to have motivated both the SDR and the DIP. For example, the DIP asserts that the UK should 'expect to buy technology that has not yet been developed or invented' and warns against the Armed Forces being 'left with old, outdated kit' [DIP, p.25]. Albeit consistent with the technology-infatuated *zeitgeist*, this could suggest an unnecessarily high-risk procurement policy. Rather than scrapping 'outdated kit' in the expectation of unknown future requirements, a more honest (and prudent) approach would be to accept that UK Armed Forces are, and always will be, on the cusp of change from legacy to novelty and that equipment procurement must have an eye to both the 'old' and the 'new'. And in a mildly surprising contribution to the debate over mass (of, in particular, armour, infantry and artillery) versus technology (in e.g., surveillance and strike), the DIP seems to argue not just that technology can multiply the effect of mass, but can to some extent replace it: 'the transformation towards a greater use of autonomy and drones ... supports an increase in warfighting readiness and lethality, *significantly increasing mass...*' [DIP, p.26]. This is either a very significant breakthrough in military thinking or an unconvincing attempt at prestidigitation.

The mass versus technology debate is closely informed by a broader discussion of the characteristics of 21st century warfare. In spite of the often breathless reportage, recent and current conflicts suggest that war has not (at least not *yet*) changed conclusively from the legacy model of mass, heavy warfare to a new model of technological advantage. War is certainly *changing* – as it always has – but it is important to understand the properties of military innovation without being seduced into thinking that all change is fundamental or even revolutionary.

All military technology is obsolescent as soon as it emerges from the factory, but that does not mean it is obsolete. In all but the rarest of examples, the replacement of the old by the new tends to be a gradual and very cautious process. It is also important to bear in mind that military innovation usually, if not inevitably, provokes countermeasures, whether technical or procedural, as explained by JFC Fuller's 'constant tactical factor'.ⁱⁱ For example, the 'drone' (or, more specifically, the uncrewed combat aerial vehicle – UCAV) is widely cited as evidence of a fundamental

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

shift in the nature of warfare. Yet technical countermeasures are already beginning to emerge that question this proposition. And if it is the case that the effect of UCAVs (e.g., in Ukraine) has been to immobilise the modern battlefield, turning it into a ‘no-go, no-man’s land’ in which manoeuvre warfare has become close to impossible, then it seems certain that land forces will find new ways to pursue their traditional tasks of taking and holding territory. Unless, of course, ‘post-modern’ warfare has also become ‘post-territorial’, with conflict being decided in some way other than by the gain or loss of territory, and perhaps even ‘post-human’ through the use of automated systems and robotics.

Elsewhere in the DIP much store is set by the claim that the ‘lethality’ of the Army can not only be quantified but even multiplied, very rapidly, by as much as ten times (and at a cost of £20bn). Interestingly, when the multipliable lethality claim first appeared in mid-2024 it was rather more modest (and possibly more achievable); a *doubling* of lethality (or ‘fighting power’) by 2027 and *the same again* by 2030; i.e., by four times overall. But even this more modest version of the claim, albeit implicit, that an abstract idea can be multiplied in such a way as to have an observable, concrete effect invites further discussion, not least because it is being presented as an indicator of success (or failure) in the reform of the British Army. It is certainly possible to *describe* ‘lethality’ at various levels of sophistication, and necessary to be able to do so; it would after all be difficult to see much value in any discussion of military equipment and training without some sense of the effect that military weapons can have on adversaries. But this can be reduced to a fairly mundane idea; that military weapons are lethal to the extent, in the words of the late (US Army) Colonel Trevor Dupuy, that they have ‘the ability to injure and if possible to kill people’.

This simple formulation might be explained in more granular detail by considering the range and accuracy of a given weapon under different conditions, the rate at which it can be fired, its kinetic and/or explosive effects on different target types, and so on. But even at this level lethality cannot be said to have much analytical and predictive authority. Dupuy went further to develop a ‘lethality scoring methodology’ (*Theoretical Lethality Index/Operational Lethality Index*) and others have considered the possibility that lethality could be used systematically, and even predictively, in the net assessment of adversarial force postures. One particularly valuable contribution to the lethality debate has been made by Nick Reynolds and Jack Watling who argue that lethality can be measured according to four criteria: ‘overmatch’, ‘potential’, ‘endurance’ and ‘efficiency’.ⁱⁱⁱ Interesting though they are, the Reynolds/Watling criteria nevertheless have elements of the abstract and/or the relative about them, suggesting that they might not yet have acquired the measurable and predictive characteristics for which the ‘lethality’ discussion appears to be searching.

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

For all its vision, self-confidence and embrace of detail, the Defence Investment Plan for the British Army will require a very strong commitment of effort and expenditure before it can be said to have been fully implemented. There will, almost certainly, be procurement delays and errors, setbacks in the public finances, and even international crises that will divert attention and funds and increase the likelihood that difficult (i.e., costly) questions will simply be ignored. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the promised investments in the Army's vehicle and equipment plan will be met, and on time; whether the digital networking of the Army within the Integrated Force will function as predicted, and within budget; and whether sufficient personnel (regular and, particularly, reserves) will be recruited and retained. And if the DIP really is to qualify as a decade-long investment plan in national defence, out to 2035, it must also be asked whether unavoidable risks of failure or delay been fully assessed and mitigated.

The Royal Air Force *Philip Lester*

The Defence Investment Plan (DIP) marks the most significant shift in UK air and space investment since the post-Cold War restructuring of the RAF. While the headline is increased spending, the deeper story is a move from incremental platform replacement towards an integrated, digitally enabled air and space force for high-intensity conflict. The RAF emerges not simply as the UK's air force, but as the UK's integrating force for combat air, space, Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) and digital command and control. This is both a major opportunity and a delivery challenge. The DIP allocates around £27.8bn to Air and £3.2bn to Space, alongside investment in the Digital Backbone, Targeting Web, cyber, weapons and IAMD. Collectively, these aim to create a "Next Generation RAF" of crewed and autonomous systems operating as one combat ecosystem. Future effectiveness will be measured less by aircraft numbers than by integration, autonomy, data and readiness.

The strongest growth areas are clear. Combat air receives sustained investment along the capability pipeline. Typhoon is extended well into the 2040s, preserving sovereign combat mass and the UK aerospace base. F-35 continues to expand, including F-35A for NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft mission. GCAP receives £8.6bn, reinforcing the UK's position among the few nations developing sixth-generation combat aviation. The most strategically significant development is Collaborative Combat Aircraft (CCA). Although initially funded at £300m, CCA changes RAF force design by adding autonomous mass, persistence, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), electronic attack and strike alongside those of crewed platforms. A flying demonstrator by around 2030 signals autonomy moving from experimentation into mainstream capability. Space grows even more dramatically. The DIP identifies the RAF as the UK's lead service for space, with Space Command

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

expanding towards six operational squadrons. Investment shifts space from support function to warfighting domain, including ISR, space control, deep-space radar, resilient satellite communications and an Integrated Air, Space and Missile Defence Operations Centre. Beyond 2030, space investment rises to at least £9bn. IAMD is another major expansion: the RAF becomes lead command for national IAMD through new command-and-control systems, AI-enabled battle management, enhanced sensing and NATO integration.

The DIP contains few explicit reductions, but several implicit shifts are evident. First, air power is no longer centred on exquisite crewed aircraft operating independently. Future combat air becomes distributed, autonomous and networked, reducing the relative dominance of traditional fast jets as the sole source of combat mass. Secondly, investment increasingly favours systems, software and integration over additional platform numbers. Success will depend less on fleet size and more on connecting sensors, shooters and decision-makers. Thirdly, some legacy programmes are curtailed. The decision not to proceed with SKYNET 6 Narrowband, replacing it with extended SKYNET 5 capability and greater use of commercial “space as a service”, shows a willingness to trade traditional acquisition for more agile capability models. Finally, the RAF becomes less an independent Service delivering isolated air effects and more the air and space component of an Integrated Force. That strengthens UK defence overall but requires cultural adaptation.

The principal risks concern implementation. The RAF must sustain Typhoon and F-35 readiness while introducing CCAs, delivering GCAP, expanding Space Command, standing up IAMD and implementing the Digital Targeting Web. Each is complex; together they form one of the most demanding transformation portfolios the RAF has attempted. Transition risk is also significant. By 2030, AI, digital integration, autonomy and advanced command systems will still be maturing. Until GCAP reaches service, deterrence must rest on Typhoon, F-35 and early autonomous systems. Industrial capacity is equally critical. Delivery depends on supply chains, software development, skilled engineers and workforce growth keeping pace with investment. Above all, readiness remains decisive: new equipment will not improve combat power without trained personnel, sustainment, infrastructure, munitions and resilient logistics.

The opportunities are substantial. The RAF becomes the UK’s principal integrator across air, space and digital warfare. Its influence expands beyond combat aviation into national air defence, space operations, AI-enabled command and control and cross-domain integration. Industrial opportunity is also significant. Continued investment in Typhoon, GCAP and autonomous systems secures the UK combat air industrial base into the 2040s, creating export potential and supporting sovereign

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

design capability. Operationally, the RAF gains resilience through a more diversified force. Autonomous systems provide affordable mass, while space investment strengthens communications, intelligence and targeting. Together these improve survivability in high-end conflict.

According to the June 2026 draft of the DIP, by 2030 the RAF should be more ready, more digitally integrated and better defended than today, though still in transition. Typhoon and F-35 will remain the operational backbone, supported by enhanced IAMD, improved weapons stockpiles, stronger command networks and early autonomous capabilities. Availability should improve if sustainment and readiness investment is delivered, but major transformation programmes will still be maturing. By 2035, assuming successful delivery, the RAF should possess an integrated air and space force comprising Typhoon, F-35A/B, operational CCA, mature Space Command, IAMD, AI-enabled battle management and early GCAP elements. Combat effectiveness should derive less from individual aircraft performance than from generating, integrating and sustaining effects across domains. The RAF of 2035 should therefore be more resilient, survivable and lethal, even if its traditional platform mix appears broadly familiar.

The Defence Investment Plan also reinforces the RAF's position as one of NATO's leading air forces and the United States Air Force's closest European partner. Investment in F-35A, NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft mission, IAMD, AI-enabled command networks and space capabilities strengthens interoperability with the USAF. GCAP deepens partnership with Japan and Italy, while wider initiatives with Norway, Germany, AUKUS partners and Five Eyes nations broaden allied development. The RAF is positioned not simply as a national force but as a framework contributor to NATO's future integrated air and space architecture, able to lead in combat air integration, space operations, digital targeting and coalition command and control. Overall, the RAF's comparative advantage will no longer rest solely on advanced aircraft. Its strategic value will increasingly derive from integrating combat air, space, digital networks, autonomous systems and NATO partnerships into a coherent, rapidly deployable warfighting capability.

The Cyber and Information Domain *Ewan Lawson*

As with both the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and the National Security Strategy (NSS), the Defence Investment Plan (DIP) explicitly recognizes the importance of cyberspace albeit coupled with the broader electromagnetic (EM) domain. It outlines an investment of £2.5 bn over 2026-27 to sustain and develop the Defence Cyber and EM Force which was established late in 2025 under the newly rebranded Cyber and Specialist Operations Command at Northwood. Whilst it is often difficult to separate out civilian and military government expenditure on cyber in many states' public

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

pronouncement, this funding would seem to be on a par with European peers. However, unlike conventional capabilities where it is possible to assess how money is being invested in platforms and systems, military cyber capabilities are of necessity opaque.

In considering the DIP approach to cyber, it is important to understand what defence is seeking to do in and through cyberspace and the EM environment, and how responsibilities are shared across government. The Defence Cyber and EM Force was established to command defensive cyber operations and to improve the protection and resilience of defence networks beyond those existing in the single services. In this, it works alongside the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) to share understanding of threats and vulnerabilities across the whole of the defence enterprise including the vital connection points with the critical national infrastructure (CNI). It does not conduct offensive cyber operations which are the responsibility of the National Cyber Force (NCF). Whilst the NCF includes armed forces personnel, the Defence Cyber and EM Force does have a role in ensuring that, where appropriate, offensive cyber activities are integrated into military operations effectively. MoD will be contributing financially to NCF operations but perhaps for security reasons, there is no clear indication of this in the DIP.

Thus, the £2.5 bn is primarily allocated to defence of the armed forces elements of both cyberspace and the EM spectrum. This includes the Digital Targeting Network which is a key commitment in the DIP. The investment will be focused on personnel costs along with the purchase of infrastructure and capability development in both software and hardware. On the first of these, there is positive reporting of a first tranche of graduates from the Defence Cyber Academy, although it must be recognized that there continues to be a significant gap in the numbers of skilled cyber security professionals in the UK economy. The private sector is often able to offer significantly greater financial rewards compared to those in the military and government and it would have been good to see some suggestions of further initiatives (and investment) to close these gaps.

Lastly, whilst it is recognized that the DIP is explicitly about defence, given the attention paid to the military role in homeland defence in the SDR and NSS, the absence of any sense of how the armed forces should and could contribute to security of the CNI in any transition to conflict is a significant gap. The military would routinely expect to contribute to the physical security of vulnerable points in the CNI through guarding, patrolling and surveillance, but it is unclear what role it would play in the digital space. The SDR highlighted the vulnerabilities of the CNI and the need for Defence to play a role with the operators and called for a new deal plan to be

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

presented by the end of 2026. So far there has been nothing announced publicly at least.

In summary, the June 2026 draft of the DIP appears to make a valuable contribution to cyber and EM capabilities in UK defence, but there are some important areas which appear to have been overlooked.

UK Defence Industry *Paul Hough*

On 30 June 2026 the UK published the long-delayed Defence Investment Plan (DIP). There are many tests that the DIP can be subjected to. Is it affordable? Does it reflect the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine? Does it fulfil the intent of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review are but three.

Whilst there has been some commentary on the various technologies and capabilities included in the DIP, much of the media coverage of the DIP has focussed on how much money will be spent and when, where the funds will come from, and whether the government will have to make or amend its fiscal rules on borrowing and public finances more broadly. The government has emphasised the political/electoral effect of defence spending on UK jobs and economic growth (defence as an economic *investment* and as a stimulus for, and source of UK *employment*), whilst at the same time conveying to the UK public a different, and rather more urgent message; that the UK is already on a war footing. It is not immediately obvious that these two imperatives – the health of the domestic economy on the one hand, and strategic obligations on the other – sit that well together. And Prime Minister Andy Burnham's insistence that defence spending will focus on UK domiciled companies appears only to add to the uncertainty surrounding the government's priorities. What is being overlooked in these discussions is a truth that has been confirmed by the war in Ukraine; that functioning industrial capacity and the generation of effective capability are vital to deterrence and to victory should deterrence fail.

A recent report from the US Center for Strategic and International Studies makes this key point unequivocally: 'getting on a wartime footing takes time. It must be built and maintained through strong and consistent budgetary demand signals, enduring coordination within supplier networks, effective coordination mechanisms and incentive structures between government and industry, and strong U.S. collaboration with allies and partners.'

Does the DIP place the UK defence industrial base on a war footing? The document acknowledges that industrial capacity and capability are essential elements of military, yet it persists in defining that capacity and capability narrowly in UK terms.

To illustrate the point, one section in the DIP describes defence as an *engine for growth*, apparently assuming that using defence spending to enhance economic

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

growth is somehow synonymous with achieving military goals and outcomes. This is an inarticulate, even a dangerous assumption insofar as it is unclear which objective – defence or growth – will take priority should they become misaligned as they undoubtedly will. Furthermore, the stark reality is that, like other nations in Europe, the UK acting alone would be incapable of developing and sustaining a defence industrial base that covers the breadth and depth of the required military capability.

The fragmentation of the European Defence Industrial Base (EDIB) is recognised by European NATO members and the EU as a serious weakness in European military capability, exacerbated by the effective withdrawal of the USA from the defence of Europe. Whilst the DIP mentions *‘working closely with HM Treasury and with Finland, Netherlands and other like-minded NATO allies on the establishment of a Multilateral Defence Mechanism’* this is hardly a ringing endorsement of a pan-European effort to develop and sustain a resilient and capable defence industrial base that will enhance deterrence and be vital to defence should deterrence fail.

The Strategic Defence Review of July 2025, the Defence Industrial Strategy of September 2025 (subtitled, significantly, Making Defence an Engine for Growth) and now the Defence Investment Plan of June 2026 all fail to set out an Industrial Strategy for Defence or acknowledge the need for it. These are missed opportunities. The UK could have played a leading role in accelerating the effort already underway under the umbrella of the EU and between EU member states. This will paradoxically reduce defence spending as an engine for growth as UK industry is subjected to, rather than leading, the consolidation of the fragmented industrial base. The answer to the question does the DIP place the defence industrial base on Prime Minister Burnham’s ‘war footing’ is a sobering ‘No’.

Conclusion *Paul Cornish*

The UK Defence Investment Plan has been a chaotic saga of indecision, equivocation and delay. The most charitable interpretation is that although the published document is not much of a *plan* and was neither especially concerned with real *investment* in defence, it can more fairly be understood as ‘work in progress’ – an early draft of public policy that continues to be closely debated within government. Actual plans based on actual investments will emerge when the new Chancellor’s budget – tellingly described in late August 2026 as the ‘defence budget’ – is announced on 28 October 2028, some 16 months after the publication of the UK Strategic Defence Review in June 2025.

Undeterred by the chaos, this collection of commentaries has tried to take the DIP seriously by asking a straightforward question: had it been implemented as expected, what effect could the June 2026 DIP have had on UK defence? This is a question that

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

deserves close examination, as well as explanation for any adjustments to the UK's national strategy, its investment plan and its budget that might appear in the October 2026 budget. UK armed forces, defence industrial primes and contractors (UK-based, European and international), UK allies in NATO and elsewhere, together with the UK public should not be expected to wait any longer for clarity, consistency and conviction in UK defence strategy, planning and investment.

As far as the Royal Navy is concerned, in his essay Peter Roberts suggests that together, the SDR and DIP might not produce the balanced and capable maritime force that the UK will require. Alarmingly, Roberts suggests that the Royal Navy might have to rely simply on hope that the right decisions will have been taken. Paul Cornish's account of the projected reform of the British Army points to a disturbingly wide range of spending, personnel and equipment promises that will need to be met if the result is to be coherent and effective. Cornish also asks whether the 'conceptual framework' that is supposedly driving Army reform is as well-tested and robust as might be expected. The Royal Air Force emerges in good shape in the context of the DIP although, as Philip Lester notes, there are questions to be asked as to long-term capability plans. Ewan Lawson warns of future shortfalls in expertise in the cyber and information domains and wonders why the DIP says nothing about the SDR's call for a military role in the digital security of the UK national infrastructure. Paul Hough's account of the state of defence industry is the most pessimistic of all. Hough asks whether the DIP places the UK's relations with defence industry on a 'war footing', to which the answer is a resounding 'No'.

There are surprising omissions in the DIP, some of which could be addressed if the document is indeed to be revised before the October budget. The ethics of the military use of AI, for example, mentioned just once in the SDR but not at all the DIP, would merit serious analysis as well as serious investment. In contrast, the MoD's seeming obsession with institutions of financial and procurement management, and their associated acronym – PUFINs, NWF, BBB, UKEF, DSRB, RDEL, CDEL, DFIS, DIAG, with view to a DIS that will develop a DIR supported by a DIU within the NAD – should probably be held more closely in check. These examples of bureaucratic introversion amount to inelegant proof that the MoD has badly lost its way if it expects the UK public to follow the national defence debate in the next few, critically important years of UK defence recovery. Above all the (revised) DIP should accept that the purpose of defence 'investment' should be understood to be, primarily, strategic rather than financial. And investment in defence must be made immediately; not hedged either by contending bids for public funds or by the possibility that defence requirements might change in the future. The final lines of page 24 of the DIP read uncomfortably like the warning given routinely by financial advisors to the effect that investments can go down as well as up: 'this investment

The UK Defence Investment Plan, 2026: the Return of the Walking Dead?

plan does not provide a restrictive forecast for investments after 2030 – instead, for the first time Defence is making an allocation for future development of capabilities, which will be drawn down as funding is allocated and contracts placed.’ In other words, at a time of international crises and with UK Armed Forces in immediate need of refunding and reconstruction, the UK government is warning that its ‘investment’ in defence can go down as well as up.

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ⁱ *Financial Times*, 28 August 2026: <https://www.ft.com/content/fc925436-4bcb-444c-b929-83014f6da44d?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

ⁱⁱ JFC Fuller, *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier* (London, I. Nicholson and Watson, 1936), p.453.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nick Reynolds and Jack Watling, *Measuring Lethality: Army Combat Power and Force Design* (London: RUSI, April 2026),