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## How Capable is the Royal Air Force?

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## How Capable is the Royal Air Force?

The question of how capable the Royal Air Force (RAF) is, cannot be answered in simple or absolute terms. “Capability” is a competitive and comparative concept made even more difficult by the contemporary geopolitical, economic and delivery challenges facing the RAF. But in its most basic form, capability implies not only what the RAF possesses in terms of platforms and personnel, but also what it is expected to deliver politically, strategically and operationally and how these two aspects marry-up. It is, therefore, a combined assessment of what the RAF is *for* and this must take account of the competitive nature of conflict, along with an assessment of what the RAF *achieves*. This in turn requires a comparative assessment of the RAF’s abilities against those of adversaries or potential adversaries. One might argue that it is the former which represents the greatest importance as it more closely aligns political requirements and national expectations. Capability must, therefore, encompass readiness, resilience, sustainability and the ability to generate a range of meaningful effects across the spectrum of conflict scenarios to achieve the desired political objectives. Any serious assessment must therefore consider multiple dimensions: the political demand signal, public expectations, doctrinal benchmarks, the physical realities of equipment and human ability along with the evolving geostrategic environment comprising state and non-state threats.

At the most immediate level, the first point of focus is the “political ask”: can the RAF meet all its current obligations? Broadly, the answer is ‘yes’, but with some caveats. The RAF continues to deliver a wide range of standing and contingent tasks, including Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) for UK air defence, NATO air policing, expeditionary deployments, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and contributions to coalition operations. It also underpins the UK’s nuclear deterrent through support to the Continuous at Sea Deterrent (CASD) submarine deployments. However, this delivery is often achieved with the management of tight margins and associated risk, particularly under conditions of concurrent demand requiring high levels of overlapping tasks, allied actions and resource allocation. The RAF’s force structure is relatively small compared with historical norms, and its ability to surge or sustain high-intensity operations or address additional and simultaneous commitments or contingencies over prolonged periods is understandably challenging.

The second point of focus is one of “popular expectation”. There is a growing assumption within the UK that the Armed Forces, including the RAF, can respond decisively to crises anywhere in the world while simultaneously maintaining domestic security and fulfilling alliance obligations. This expectation has been shaped by decades of relatively low-intensity expeditionary operations and the perceived technological superiority of Western air power. Yet such expectations are increasingly difficult to meet in a resource-constrained environment and one where operational demands, by their very character, are short-notice and not necessarily linked to standing commitments or readiness. The RAF remains highly

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capable in delivering precision effects at range, but the breadth of tasks and rapidity of response often over long distances, now expected of it, ranging from counter-terrorism to deterrence against peer adversaries, places significant strain on its capacity, resilience and overall readiness. In short, the 'expectation' all too often outstrips the capabilities at readiness.

The challenge in assessing capability lies in the context in which it is judged. Capability is not simply a measure of what exists today; it is also a function of what will be required tomorrow. The contemporary security environment is characterised by increasing uncertainty, with threats diversifying and becoming more complex. Russia represents a resurgent peer competitor with significant integrated air defence systems, advanced combat aircraft and long-range strike capabilities. Iran poses a persistent regional threat through a combination of ballistic missiles, unmanned systems and proxy forces – although this has been significantly reduced by US and Israeli operations over the last month. Meanwhile, China acts as a potential “spoiler” in the global system, challenging Western norms and investing heavily in advanced air and space capabilities, even if it is not a direct adversary in the Euro-Atlantic theatre. In this context, capability cannot be reduced to the number of platforms, systems or people in service. It must be understood as a system of systems. It includes weapon stockpiles, logistics and supply chains, maintenance regimes, trained personnel, intelligence capabilities, communications networks, and digital integration. It also encompasses less tangible elements such as morale, leadership and the “warfighting spirit” that underpins effective military performance. The RAF's ability to generate air and space power effects depends on the integration of all these components, and weaknesses in any one area can have disproportionate consequences.

Capability is not only about mass, although it is important and there is undoubtedly a critical mass from which the RAF can deliver all of its outputs. However, to nail that down to a precise figure is neither an exact process nor necessarily a valuable approach either. Advantage in combat at the tactical level and through design and implementation at the operational and strategic levels is achieved through the way systems are integrated and coordinated. And this goes beyond intra-service integration to include close and mission-specific integration with the Royal Navy, the Army and with our NATO allies too. This 'hidden wiring', achieved through digitised networks and integration of effectors and systems, and delivered from and through the space and cyber domains enables rapidity, convergence and precision of effort. It also enables more timely information collection, assessment, distribution and use. This is where the procurement and integration of a range of crewed and uncrewed or collaborative platforms provide the necessary mass required to meet the political demands to deliver greater flexibility as well as providing a wider range of employment options than purely crewed platforms.

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UK air and space power doctrine also provides a useful framework for assessing capability. It emphasises characteristics such as reach, speed, agility, precision and ubiquity. These attributes allow air and space power to deliver rapid and decisive effects across multiple domains. The RAF retains strong qualitative advantages in many of these areas. Its combat aircraft, such as the Typhoon and F-35B, are among the most advanced in the world. Its ISR capabilities, including platforms like Rivet Joint and Protector, provide critical situational awareness. Its integration with NATO allies enhances its effectiveness and extends its reach. However, doctrine also highlights the importance of persistence and resilience; areas where the RAF faces challenges. High-intensity operations require sustained sortie generation, robust supply chains and sufficient stockpiles of precision-guided munitions. Recent conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, have demonstrated the scale of consumption in modern warfare. Western air forces, including the RAF, have relatively limited stockpiles compared with the demands of a prolonged peer conflict. Replenishment is constrained by industrial capacity and supply chain vulnerabilities, raising questions about long-term sustainability.

Measuring capability therefore requires a blend of qualitative and quantitative assessment. Quantitatively, metrics such as aircraft availability, readiness levels and sortie rates provide insight into operational performance. Open-source data suggest that the RAF maintains high readiness for certain critical tasks, particularly QRA and CASD. However, overall fleet availability is affected by ageing platforms, maintenance backlogs and personnel shortages in specialised trades. The transition to newer systems, while enhancing capability in the long term, can create short-term gaps as legacy systems are retired before replacements are fully operational.

Qualitatively, capability is assessed through doctrine, training, exercises and operational experience. The RAF performs strongly in this regard. It regularly participates in large-scale exercises such as Red Flag and similar events, demonstrating high levels of interoperability and tactical proficiency. RAF personnel are well-trained and experienced, with a strong professional ethos. But human capital is finite. The RAF's emphasis on integration, both within the UK's Joint Force and with allies, enhances its effectiveness and compensates for its relatively small size. Nevertheless, the current geostrategic context is placing increasing pressure on RAF capability. The resurgence of state-based threats has shifted the focus from counter-insurgency operations to high-end warfighting. This requires different capabilities, including suppression of enemy air defences, electronic warfare and resilience against cyber and space-based threats. At the same time, the RAF must continue to address non-state threats such as terrorism, which demand persistent ISR and precision strike capabilities. Balancing these competing demands is inherently challenging.

The RAF's role as a "force of first choice" for political leaders further amplifies these pressures. Air power offers a relatively low-risk and politically acceptable means of projecting force, often without the need for large-scale ground deployments. As a result, the RAF is frequently called upon to respond rapidly to emerging crises. While this demonstrates its utility and flexibility, it also risks over-extension. Increased operational tempo leads to greater wear and tear on platforms, higher consumption of resources and increased strain on personnel. Resilience is therefore a critical issue. The RAF can and does deliver high-end capability, but its capacity to absorb shocks and sustain operations over time is limited. This is particularly evident in areas such as logistics and supply chains. The global nature of modern defence supply networks makes them vulnerable to disruption, whether through geopolitical tensions, economic pressures or cyber-attacks. Ensuring the resilience of these systems is essential and with it the necessary capabilities to meet all the political demands. Personnel availability and preparedness is another key factor. As a highly technical service, operating across all five warfighting domains, the RAF relies on highly skilled and versatile individuals, particularly in technical and specialist roles. Recruitment and retention challenges can have a direct impact on capability, as shortages in critical areas affect maintenance, operations and support functions. While the RAF continues to attract high-quality recruits, competition from the private sector, coupled with broader demographic trends, pose ongoing challenges.

It is also important to recognise that air and space power cannot achieve all political or strategic objectives on their own. The effectiveness of the RAF is closely linked to its integration with land, maritime and cyber forces as well as with capabilities that operate in, from and through Space. Joint and multi-domain operations are central to modern warfare, and the RAF's capability must be assessed within this broader context. The UK's ability to generate coherent and integrated force packages is a key determinant of overall military effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the RAF remains a highly capable force with advanced technology, skilled personnel and strong doctrinal foundations. It continues to deliver operational effects across a wide range of missions and theatres. Yet against current demands and those that may present challenges to UK national security in the immediate future, the RAF's capability may best be characterised as "sufficient but fragile". It can meet current demands, but often with a limited margin for error. The metaphor of the RAF as a "thin blue line" is therefore apt. It represents a force that is stretched but still effective, operating at the edge of its capacity. The risks associated with this posture are increasing as the strategic environment becomes more contested and unpredictable. Without sustained investment in resilience, stockpiles, infrastructure, digital networks and personnel, these risks are likely to grow. Investment in these areas should be the political priority. From these, additional platforms can be added. Without them, the addition of extra platforms will likely compromise the overall capability challenge and risk resilience.

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In conclusion, the capability of the RAF is not a binary condition but a spectrum. It is also not just about the numbers of aircraft or personnel. It is a more nuanced dynamic and it is shaped by the interplay between political demands, public expectations, doctrinal principles as well as the ever-changing demands of operational realities. Against the backdrop of all these factors, the RAF remains a potent and flexible instrument of national military power, capable of delivering decisive effects when required. However, its ability to sustain these effects in the face of increasing demand and against evolving threats, is under pressure. Assessing its capability therefore requires a balanced judgement: one that recognises both the strengths and vulnerabilities of air and space power; accepts the reality that the RAF cannot deliver 'everything, everywhere, all at once'; that it should not be expected to be capable of defeating a larger power on its own; while accepting that air power is a critical constituent of integrated, multi-dimensional warfare, with a range of allies and partners. From these realities, decision-makers can then set the right priorities and make the right investment choices that allow for the incremental development necessary for resilience and capability now and into the future.

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Philip is an operator, innovator, strategist and conceptual thinker with over 35 years' experience within the Defence and Security community including with numerous allies and partners, including NATO. He has been at the forefront of a number of Defence's force development initiatives including UK and NATO doctrine, professional military education, multi-domain integration, space, cyberspace, strategic communication, modern deterrence and CBRN defence as well as being at the heart of strategy design, implementation and orchestration as well as contributing to 3 UK defence and security reviews.

He is currently a member of the senior directing staff at the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS); an independent consultant focusing on strategy at the local government, national government and international levels; and has recently contributed to an MOD assessment into the use of evidence during the 2021 Integrated Review of Defence, Security and Foreign Policy. He is the Editor of the RCDS strategy handbook – Making Strategy Better – and leads the design and delivery of RCDS's strategy modules.



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## Comment

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