SEA POWER

Sea Power: The Defence of an Island Nation

Why Britain's defence should be built around the sea, and the fleet, industry and alliances its tasks require.

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The proposal

Britain is an island, and almost everything that keeps it alive and prosperous arrives by sea or under it. Most of its trade by weight comes through its ports. Nearly all of its international data runs through cables on the seabed. Much of its gas comes by pipeline from Norway or by tanker, and its offshore wind farms, interconnectors and oil and gas fields sit in waters it must be able to watch and defend. Its overseas territories, from the Falklands to the British Antarctic Territory, can be reached and held only by sea and air. Its closest allies, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, are maritime nations on the far side of oceans.

Defence should be built around that fact. For thirty years it has not been. The Royal Navy now has eleven destroyers and frigates, the fewest in its modern history, and in October 2026 it lost its only ice patrol ship to a serious failure. Its amphibious ships have been withdrawn and their replacement cancelled. The merchant fleet on which it would call in war has shrunk by two fifths in fourteen years. Each of these decisions was made to save money in one budget, and together they have left an island nation with a fleet too small for the tasks it already has.

This paper proposes that Britain adopt a navy first defence. Its tasks are set in priority order, its force is sized to meet them and every pound is judged by whether it does so at the lowest cost. The army and the air force are shaped to serve the same strategy. Britain will honour its NATO commitment to spend up to 3.5 per cent of national income on core defence, treating it as a ceiling to be reached if the tasks require it rather than a target to be met for its own sake. Percentages are not a strategy, and the budget will follow the tasks rather than a ratio.

The programme sets out:

- **The tasks.** A published statement of what the armed forces are for, in priority order, with a force plan costed against each task.
- **The fleet.** Enough escorts, submarines and uncrewed vessels to hold the home waters, the North Atlantic and a distant station at the same time, with the two carriers kept and properly equipped.
- **Industry.** A continuous drumbeat of orders for British yards, common hull families shared with allies and munitions production that never stops.

- **The merchant fleet and the seabed.** A strategic reserve of British ships and seafarers, and new law to protect the cables and pipelines on which the country depends.
- **The territories.** A Falklands garrison able to deter and defend without help, a permanent South Atlantic presence and naval support for the programme in Antarctica.
- **The Anglosphere at sea.** AUKUS delivered in full, a shared Type 26 family with Australia and Canada and a division of labour in which Britain leads in the North Atlantic and its allies in the Pacific.
- **Charter cities.** A defined naval role in the security of British charter cities overseas and in the sea routes that serve them.
- **The army and the air force.** An army sized to its NATO division and the defence of the home islands, with missiles that strike ships, and an air force built around fewer crewed fighters each leading uncrewed aircraft.
- **Drones and counter-drone.** Drones in every unit, steady orders that sustain British production and a national shield against drones over bases, ports and critical sites.
- **Commitments ended or reduced.** An end to military support for Ukraine and a smaller presence in the Middle East, with heavy armour capped at what the NATO division needs.
- **People.** Crews before hulls, with a single career path across the Royal Navy, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the merchant service.

1 Why the sea comes first

An island that lives by trade

About 85 per cent of the goods Britain trades with the world, by weight, moves by sea. Britain produces only around three fifths of the food it eats. It imported about 43 per cent of its energy in 2025, including much of its oil and gas, and much of its industrial input comes from abroad. A country in this position can be harmed without being invaded. Closing a strait, cutting a cable, mining an approach or threatening the insurance of the ships that serve its ports would do more damage, more quickly and at less risk to an adversary than any attack on land.

The infrastructure on and under the sea has grown faster than the means to protect it. Britain's offshore wind fleet is the second largest in the world and growing. Interconnectors link its grid to Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Ireland. Gas from the Norwegian shelf arrives by pipeline. Each is a fixed target in open water, and Russian survey and intelligence vessels have been tracked over British cables and pipelines repeatedly in recent years.

The British way of war

Britain's security has always rested on the sea. From the defeat of the Armada to the Battle of the Atlantic, the navy kept the island from invasion and kept its trade moving, and Britain fought on land as part of coalitions it could supply and reinforce by sea. In 1982 the Falklands were recovered because Britain still had carriers, amphibious ships, submarines and a merchant fleet it could requisition. Without any one of those the islands would have been lost.

The lesson is not that land and air power do not matter. Wars are decided on land, but for an island the sea decides what can be done there. A navy protects the homeland, keeps allies supplied, holds distant territories and puts a British force wherever it is needed without asking anyone's permission to cross their territory or use their bases. No other force does all of those things, and none is so hard to rebuild once it has gone.

What has been lost

The fleet has been cut in almost every review since the end of the Cold War. In July 2026 the government announced the retirement of two more frigates, leaving six Type 45 destroyers and five Type 23 frigates. Eight Type 26 and five Type 31 frigates are being built, but none is yet in service. The Defence Investment Plan published in 2026 cancelled the planned Type 83 destroyer and Type 32 frigate and the Multi-Role Strike Ship, the intended replacement for the amphibious fleet. The Type 45 destroyers will begin to leave service from 2035. Their planned successor is a distributed system, in which smaller Common Combat Vessels control uncrewed missile and sensor platforms that have yet to be designed. The amphibious fleet is to be replaced by a simpler Amphibious Transport Ship, which the government hopes to procure with the Netherlands.

Other losses are less visible. The Royal Navy has about 38,000 people, and ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary have been laid up or held at reduced readiness for want of crews. The number of British merchant ships the government counts as militarily useful fell from 841 in 2009 to 495 in 2023. HMS Protector, the ice patrol ship, suffered a serious failure in October 2026, leaving Britain with no ice patrol in the South Atlantic or Antarctica.

The threats at sea

Russia's submarine force remains its most capable arm, and its route into the Atlantic runs through the gap between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom. Its intelligence ships and its so-called shadow fleet of ageing, poorly insured tankers pass through British waters every week. China now has the largest navy in the world by number of ships and is building warships faster than any other country. Houthi attacks in the Red Sea closed one of the world's busiest shipping routes to most Western shipping for more than a year.

Allies cannot always be relied upon to fill British gaps. In April 2026 a memorandum prepared within the United States Department of Defense was reported to have considered reviewing American support for British sovereignty over the Falklands. The Secretary of State played it down, and the alliance with the United States remains the most important Britain has. The lesson is that Britain must be able to hold its own territories with its own forces.

2 Tasks first, at the lowest cost

N1 A statement of maritime tasks

The government will publish a statement of what the armed forces are for, in priority order, and keep it in force for the life of a Parliament. The tasks for the navy will be:

1. **The deterrent.** Maintain continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence and protect the submarines that provide it.

2. **Home waters and the seabed.** Defend the United Kingdom, its territorial sea and its exclusive economic zone, including ports, cables, pipelines and offshore energy.
3. **The North Atlantic and the High North.** Hold the approaches to the United Kingdom and Europe with NATO allies, above all against submarines.
4. **The overseas territories.** Deter and, if necessary, defeat any attack on the Falklands, South Georgia and the other territories, and support British presence in the Antarctic.
5. **The sea lanes and the Anglosphere.** Keep the routes on which British trade depends open, and operate alongside Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.
6. **Charter cities and British nationals.** Support the security of British charter cities and evacuate British nationals from danger overseas.

The army and the air force have tasks of their own in the same statement, set out in sections 9 and 10. The first three tasks are the core of the force and will be met first. The others will be met with the forces the core tasks require wherever possible, and with additional forces only where they cannot.

N2 A force plan costed against the tasks

Every capability the Ministry of Defence funds will be assigned to one or more tasks, and the government will publish a force plan that shows which forces meet each task, at what readiness and at what cost. Capabilities that serve no task will be retired. New capabilities will be approved only when they meet a task at lower cost than the alternatives, or meet a task that is not yet met. The plan will be reviewed in each Spending Review and audited by the National Audit Office.

N3 A budget that follows the plan

Britain will keep its NATO commitment to spend 3.5 per cent of national income on core defence by 2035 as a ceiling rather than a target. It will spend up to that level if the force plan shows that the tasks require it, and will not spend in order to reach a ratio. The plan rather than the percentage will set the budget each year, and the government will report to Parliament and to NATO how the plan meets each task and what it costs. On present estimates the force set out in this paper can be delivered at around 3 per cent of national income, and spending will rise towards the ceiling only if the threat or the cost of meeting the tasks requires it. The further 1.5 per cent that allies agreed for resilience and defence-related infrastructure will be met from spending set out in other papers, including the grid, ports, the protection of undersea infrastructure and the spending on innovation and the defence industrial base, and reported to NATO accordingly. No new spending will be created in order to reach it.

N4 Rules for the lowest cost

Every programme in the force plan will follow six rules.

- **Forward basing.** A ship based near its station, with crews rotated by air, spends its time on station rather than in transit. The gain depends on the port's ability to maintain, repair and supply the ship and on the arrangements for rotating and training its crews, and it will be calculated for each station in the force plan. Ships for distant stations will be based forward wherever a secure port can support them.

- **Common hulls.** New warships will be built on a small number of proven designs, shared with allies where possible, so that design, training, spares and upgrades are paid for once.
- **Proven before new.** Where a British or allied design already meets a requirement, it will be bought or adapted rather than designed afresh.
- **Commercial where possible.** Auxiliaries, survey vessels and support ships will be built to commercial standards with military equipment added only where the task requires it.
- **Continuous orders.** Ships, submarines and munitions will be ordered in steady sequences rather than in bursts, which lowers unit costs and keeps skilled workforces together.
- **Fixed requirements.** Requirements will be set at the start of a programme and changed only by ministerial decision, published with its cost.

3 The fleet the tasks require

What the fleet must sustain at once

The size of the fleet follows from what it must do at the same time, allowing for the ships in maintenance and training. A ship based in Britain is typically available for operations for about a third of its life, so a task that needs one ship on station at all times needs about three in the cycle. The table illustrates the escorts the tasks in N1 require. It is an outline for the force plan to test rather than a final count.

TASK	STANDING COMMITMENT	ESCORTS IN THE CYCLE
Protection of the deterrent	One anti-submarine frigate	About 3
Home waters and the seabed	One frigate, alongside uncrewed vessels	About 3
North Atlantic and the High North	Two frigates with NATO	About 6
The carrier group in the Atlantic	One air defence ship and one anti-submarine frigate	About 6
Air and missile defence of the home islands	One air defence ship	About 3
South Atlantic	One frigate based in the Falklands	About 2
The Gulf and the Red Sea	One frigate based in Bahrain	About 2
Total		About 25

Forward basing explains the difference on the distant stations. The Falklands are about three weeks' sailing from Britain. A ship sent from home on a seven-month deployment spends about five months on station, so continuous presence would need three or four ships in the cycle. A ship based in the islands with crews rotated by air can remain on station for years between refits, provided the port can carry out its routine maintenance, which is why N20 develops Mare Harbour. HMS Montrose was based in Bahrain from 2019 to 2023 on this model. A carrier group operating in the Atlantic also shares its escorts with the NATO task, where a deployment to the far side of the world would need its own.

N5 Escorts

Complete the eight Type 26 and five Type 31 frigates as quickly as the yards allow. Order a second batch of five Type 31 frigates for the distant stations, based forward in the Falklands, the Gulf and elsewhere as the tasks require. The build contract for the first five was let at a fixed price of about £1.25 billion, which excluded the equipment supplied by the government, later additions to their capability and their support in service. The force plan will cost a second batch on that full basis, and it is still likely to be the cheapest way to hold a distant station with a warship.

Replace the Type 45 destroyers with an air defence capability that can protect the carrier group and the home islands, including against ballistic missiles. The Defence Investment Plan proposes a distributed system, with at least six Common Combat Vessels controlling uncrewed missile and sensor platforms. It may prove cheaper and more resilient than a few large ships, but its uncrewed platforms have not yet been designed, and a group that depends on them cannot defend itself if they are delayed, lost or jammed. The force plan will compare that system with an air defence ship derived from the Type 26 design, which Canada has adapted for the role, on cost, maturity, resilience and the ability of a single ship to deploy on its own. A shared design does not by itself make a cheap ship, because the radar and missile systems must still be integrated and supported, and the comparison will include those costs. The Type 45s will not leave service until the chosen successor can do their work.

On these orders the navy would have about two dozen crewed escorts within fifteen years, working alongside the uncrewed vessels in N9. The final number will be set by the force plan in N2.

N6 Submarines

Complete the seventh Astute-class submarine and the four Dreadnought-class submarines that will carry the deterrent. Build up to twelve SSN-AUKUS submarines at Barrow, with the first in service in the late 2030s. The number of submarines available for operations is limited as much by maintenance as by construction, so the docks at Devonport and Faslane will be expanded and modernised as a first priority, so that no submarine waits for a dock.

N7 The carriers

Keep both Queen Elizabeth-class carriers in service, with one ready for operations at all times. A carrier gives Britain air power wherever it is needed without the need for a foreign base, and for the Falklands and the far north there is often no other way to provide it. The carriers' standing role will be in the Atlantic: in the North Atlantic and the High North with NATO, where a British carrier allows the United States to concentrate its own carriers in the Pacific, and in the South Atlantic as the means of reinforcing the Falklands. The force plan will compare the cost of the carriers and their support with the alternatives for each task. Complete the purchase of enough F-35B aircraft to embark a full air group at surge, and add uncrewed aircraft for surveillance, refuelling and strike so that each carrier can operate at full strength at lower cost.

N8 Patrol, survey and the ice patrol ship

Keep the River-class offshore patrol vessels on their overseas stations and replace them in time with ships of the same type. Bring forward the replacement of HMS Protector so that Britain has an ice patrol ship in service as soon as one can be built or bought, as set out in The Southern Frontier. Rebuild the

navy's hydrographic survey capability, which charts British waters and supports the survey of the British Antarctic Territory.

N9 Uncrewed vessels and the undersea battle

Build a fleet of uncrewed surface and undersea vessels to watch the approaches, track submarines, find mines and protect cables and pipelines, controlled from crewed ships and from shore. Deliver the Atlantic Bastion programme of undersea surveillance in full, with RFA Proteus and successor ships to guard the seabed. Replace the remaining crewed minehunters with uncrewed systems as each is proved at sea. Uncrewed vessels will be bought in numbers, at low unit cost, and replaced as the technology improves. They will be developed through the autonomy mission in Building British Industry, with Plymouth as a centre for maritime autonomy.

N10 Amphibious and littoral forces

Keep the Royal Marines as the navy's force for the High North, raids from the sea and the reinforcement of the territories. Retain the government's plan to join the Netherlands-led Amphibious Transport Ship programme, which is simpler and cheaper than the cancelled Multi-Role Strike Ship, and accelerate it so that the gap without dedicated amphibious ships is as short as possible. Until the new ships are in service, retain the Bay-class landing ships and charter commercially derived roll-on roll-off ships to carry vehicles and stores.

N11 Support ships and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary

Bring the three Fleet Solid Support ships into service as planned, and keep enough tankers and stores ships in service to support a carrier group and a distant station at the same time. Crew the Royal Fleet Auxiliary fully before buying more of its ships, with pay and conditions that compete with commercial shipping, which is the main reason it has lost seafarers.

N12 Munitions

Hold stocks of missiles, torpedoes, mines and shells sized to the tasks, including the stocks needed to fight at high intensity for an agreed period. Keep production lines for the principal naval munitions working continuously, with small steady orders in peacetime and the capacity to increase output quickly in war. Make the principal naval munitions in Britain or with close allies, building on production at Bolton, Belfast and Portsmouth.

4 Ships built in Britain

N13 A drumbeat of orders

Publish a thirty-year shipbuilding plan that gives each yard a steady sequence of orders, so that firms can invest and train with confidence. Complex warships and submarines will be built on the Clyde, at Rosyth and at Barrow. Auxiliaries and support ships will be built at commercial yards, including Belfast and Appledore. The plan will be updated with each Spending Review and every order will be placed in the sequence the plan sets out.

N14 Export and shared designs

Treat export as part of the plan rather than an afterthought. Australia is building six Hunter-class frigates and Canada fifteen River-class destroyers on the Type 26 design, Norway has chosen the Type 26 in a contract worth about £10 billion and the Type 31 design has been licensed to Poland and Indonesia. Export orders share development costs and keep production lines working, which can lower the price Britain pays where contracts and yard capacity are arranged to capture the benefit. Britain will support its designs abroad as a national effort, led by a single team in government with the authority to agree government-to-government terms.

N15 The supply chain

Secure domestic or allied supply of the components a warship cannot do without, including steel plate, forgings, propulsion, sonar and combat systems. The forgings and rare earth magnets in the advanced materials mission of Building British Industry will be sized to meet naval demand, and the Ministry of Defence will act as anchor customer for them.

5 A merchant fleet that can serve

N16 A strategic reserve of British ships

Create a strategic reserve of merchant ships registered in Britain and crewed by British seafarers, available to the state in a crisis under contracts agreed in advance. Shipping companies in the tonnage tax regime will be offered better terms in return for committing ships to the reserve. Roll-on roll-off ships, tankers and heavy-lift vessels will be the priority, since these are the ships the armed forces would need first.

N17 British seafarers

Expand the training of British officers and ratings for the merchant service, through the tonnage tax training commitment and the maritime colleges, and make it straightforward to move between the merchant service, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the Royal Naval Reserve. A country that wants a navy in war needs seafarers in peace.

N18 The law of the seabed

Replace the Submarine Telegraph Act 1885, whose penalties for damaging a cable have never been brought up to date, with an Undersea Infrastructure Act. It will create serious offences for damaging cables, pipelines and offshore energy infrastructure, give the navy and the police clear powers to board and inspect vessels in British waters and, within the limits of the law of the sea, in the exclusive economic zone, and require owners of critical infrastructure to report incidents and maintain repair capacity. Tankers passing through British waters will be required to show valid insurance, and those that cannot will be stopped from using British ports and services.

6 The Falklands, the South Atlantic and Antarctica

N19 A garrison that can hold alone

Maintain a garrison in the Falklands able to deter an attack and defeat one without help from any other country. Today it consists of about 1,500 service personnel at Mount Pleasant, a flight of four Typhoon fighters, an air defence battery, an infantry company and a single offshore patrol vessel. The fighters will be replaced with later aircraft before their present type leaves service. A Type 31 frigate from N5 will be based in the islands, with crews rotated by air, and a submarine will patrol the South Atlantic at intervals that are not announced.

N20 The routes to the islands

Keep the air bridge to the Falklands independent of the goodwill of third countries, by maintaining the runway and fuel at Ascension Island to the standard the air bridge requires. Develop the port at Mare Harbour so that it can support a forward-based frigate and the ice patrol ship, and coordinate this work with the development of Stanley as an Antarctic gateway in The Southern Frontier.

N21 South Georgia and the British Antarctic Territory

Use the ice patrol ship and the forward-based frigate to maintain a regular British presence around South Georgia and in the British Antarctic Territory, to protect the fisheries and to carry out the inspections of foreign stations and vessels that the Antarctic Treaty permits. Naval presence in the South Atlantic is the foundation on which the programme in The Southern Frontier is built.

7 The Anglosphere at sea

N22 AUKUS in full

Deliver AUKUS in full, with SSN-AUKUS built in Britain and Australia to a common design, and advanced technology developed and shared among the three partners. Australia is investing about £2.4 billion in the Rolls-Royce reactor plant at Derby, and its order for the submarines sustains British industry for decades. Britain will treat AUKUS as a permanent alliance rather than a procurement programme, with a standing joint office and shared plans for maintenance, training and crewing.

N23 A family of ships

Use the Type 26 family as the basis of closer cooperation with Australia, Canada and Norway. The four navies will share spares, training, upgrades and test facilities, and their ships will be able to support one another in any port where one of them is based. The same approach will be offered for SSN-AUKUS and for future uncrewed vessels.

N24 Deployments with allies

Divide the work among the allies rather than duplicate it. The United States and Australia lead in the Pacific and Britain leads in the North Atlantic, where its carrier and escorts free American ships for the Pacific. Britain's presence in the Indo-Pacific will come from the means that suit it best: AUKUS submarines rotating through Western Australia from 2027, offshore patrol vessels kept permanently in the region, frigates deployed when the Atlantic tasks allow and the industrial partnerships of AUKUS, the

Type 26 family and GCAP with Japan. A carrier will visit the region only when its Atlantic tasks allow. Deepen the Five Eyes partnership in undersea surveillance, so that the allies share the picture of submarine activity across the oceans in which they operate. Offer British designs and support as New Zealand replaces its frigates.

N25 Northern Europe

Lead the defence of the North Atlantic and the High North with Norway, Denmark, Iceland and the Netherlands through the Joint Expeditionary Force and NATO. These are the waters through which any threat to the British Isles would come, and Britain's role there is the largest contribution it makes to European security.

8 Charter cities and the sea lanes

N26 The navy and the charter cities

The founding charter of each British charter city will set out how its external defence is provided. The host state will normally remain responsible for defence of the territory, while Britain retains the right to protect British personnel and property and to evacuate British nationals and residents. No city will be founded where Britain cannot reach it by sea and air.

Charter cities on the sea routes will be invited to offer port services, supply and repair to the Royal Navy and allied navies on commercial terms. A city that serves shipping is also a place where British ships can be supported, without the cost of a permanent military base.

9 The army

The army's place in a maritime strategy is not to be a smaller copy of the continental armies of Europe. Its tasks are to meet Britain's commitments to NATO on land, to defend the home islands and the bases from which the navy and the air force operate and to provide forces that can be carried and supplied by sea. Its size and equipment will be set by those tasks in the force plan, and it will not be expanded beyond them.

N27 The NATO division and Estonia

Keep the army's contribution of a war-fighting division to NATO. Keep the battlegroup Britain leads in Estonia, and the brigade held ready in Britain to reinforce it, at their present strength. Britain's place on NATO's eastern flank is a promise made to an ally and it will be kept, but it will not be enlarged, because the defence of the North Atlantic and the High North is the largest contribution Britain makes to the security of Europe.

N28 Armour sized to the division

Hold heavy armour only for the NATO division. Complete the conversion of 148 Challenger 2 tanks to Challenger 3, which is sized to that task and will not be added to. The upgrade costs a fraction of the price of new tanks, and it replaces a rifled gun unique in NATO with the smoothbore gun and ammunition that allies use. Its contract will be held to its price, and the tanks will be given protection against drones as well as missiles before they enter service. The Ajax reconnaissance vehicle, which has been halted

twice after crews were injured by noise and vibration, will be given a deadline. If it has not passed its trials and entered service safely by the end of the first year in office, the programme will be ended and a proven vehicle bought from a British or allied production line.

N29 Defence of the home islands

Make the defence of the United Kingdom and its bases against aircraft, missiles and drones a principal task of the army, alongside the air force and the navy. Double the army's Sky Sabre air defence batteries, as already planned, and give priority to the protection of naval bases, airfields, ports, nuclear sites and energy infrastructure. The Army Reserve will be organised around home defence and the protection of critical infrastructure, so that it has a clear purpose in peace and in war.

N30 Missiles that strike ships

Buy the version of the Precision Strike Missile designed to strike ships at sea, building on Britain's membership of the programme with the United States and Australia. Anti-ship missiles launched from land can deny the sea to an enemy at a fraction of the cost of a warship. Deployed in the Falklands, in the High North with allies and at home, they make the army part of the maritime strategy rather than separate from it.

N31 Forces that go by sea

Keep light forces, alongside the Royal Marines, that can be carried by sea and air to reinforce the territories, evacuate British nationals and support the charter cities. They will be trained to operate from the carriers and from the amphibious and commercial ships in N10.

10 The air force

N32 The air defence of the United Kingdom

Defend British airspace with Typhoon fighters held at readiness, and build a layered defence of the home islands against aircraft, missiles and drones that uses the radars and missiles of the fleet, Sky Sabre and the counter-drone system in N38. The defence plan published in 2026 funds radars for homeland air defence but no defence on land against ballistic missiles. The force plan will set out how the home islands are to be protected against them and at what cost, including whether the upgraded Type 45 destroyers and their successors can provide that protection from the sea.

N33 GCAP with fewer crewed aircraft

Continue the Global Combat Air Programme with Italy and Japan, which ties Britain to its closest partner in the Pacific and sustains its combat air industry. The aim is a force of fewer crewed aircraft than a like-for-like replacement of Typhoon would require, each controlling several uncrewed aircraft that carry sensors, weapons and electronic warfare equipment, bought in larger numbers and at lower unit cost. The number of crewed aircraft will be reduced only as the uncrewed aircraft prove their performance, availability and operating costs in service, in the same way that crewed minehunters are replaced only as uncrewed systems are proved at sea. The F-35 fleet and the carrier air groups in N7 will follow the same approach.

N34 Maritime patrol and the eyes of the fleet

Expand the P-8 maritime patrol fleet beyond its present nine aircraft, which are too few to watch the approaches and support the fleet at the same time, and add long-range uncrewed aircraft for maritime surveillance. Size the E-7 airborne early warning fleet to the tasks in the force plan, since three aircraft cannot keep one on task at all times.

N35 Tankers, transport and the air bridge

Keep the tankers and transport aircraft on which the territories and the fleet depend, including those that fly the air bridge to the Falklands in N20.

11 Drones and counter-drone

The war in Ukraine has changed the character of fighting faster than any procurement system was built to follow. Small drones costing a few hundred pounds now cause most of the casualties at the front. Uncrewed boats, with missiles, drove Russia's Black Sea Fleet from the western Black Sea although Ukraine had almost no navy of its own. Long-range drones are launched in hundreds against power stations and cities, and each one shot down with a missile costs the defender far more than it cost the attacker. In the Red Sea, allied warships fired missiles costing a million pounds or more to stop drones costing a few tens of thousands.

Britain is exposed to the same threats at home. In November 2024 drones were seen over the air bases at Lakenheath and Mildenhall on several nights, and in 2025 airports in Copenhagen, Oslo and Munich were closed by drones overhead. Britain has no national system for detecting and defeating drones over its bases, ports and energy sites, and the powers to bring one down are divided between the armed forces and the police.

The defence plan published in 2026 sets aside £5 billion over four years for drones and autonomous systems, the largest such investment the armed forces have made. This paper keeps that money and directs it by the same rule as the rest of the programme. Drones and the means to defeat them will be bought for tasks, in quantity and at the lowest cost.

N36 Drones in every unit

Equip every combat unit of the army and the Royal Marines with drones for reconnaissance, strike and electronic warfare, and train every soldier to use them and to defend against them. Small drones will be bought as munitions rather than aircraft, from a consumables budget, in large numbers and to designs that can be changed in weeks as an enemy adapts. War stocks will be held of drones and of their components, including the motors, batteries, cameras and radios that are now made mostly in China.

N37 Orders that sustain production

The industrial base for drones and other uncrewed systems is built through the autonomy mission in Building British Industry, which sets out the protected procurement lane, the national standard, the proving network and the growth capital that turn the government's existing drone strategies into repeat orders. This paper adds only what defence itself must do as the customer. It will place rolling orders with

several suppliers rather than single long contracts, so that designs compete and improve, and will pay for capacity that can increase output quickly in war. The factories established in Britain to make interceptor drones for Ukraine will be turned to supplying the British armed forces.

N38 A national counter-drone shield

Create a single national system to detect, track and defeat drones over military bases, naval ports, nuclear sites, airports, energy infrastructure and other critical sites, under the command of the air force as part of the air defence of the United Kingdom. It will combine radar and other sensors, electronic jamming, interceptor drones, guns and directed energy weapons, so that each threat is met by the cheapest means that works and missiles are kept for the targets that require them.

N39 Cheap shots at sea

Fit the fleet with layered defences against drones and uncrewed boats that use guns, interceptor drones and lasers before missiles. The DragonFire laser, due to be fitted to the Type 45 destroyers from 2027, costs about £10 a shot. It will be fitted across the escort fleet and the auxiliaries as it is proved, together with the radio frequency weapons now in trials, and naval bases and anchorages will be protected against uncrewed boats.

N40 Uncrewed defence for the territories

Use uncrewed surface vessels, underwater drones and long-range aerial drones to watch and defend the Falklands, South Georgia and the approaches to the home islands, alongside the anti-ship missiles in N30. They extend what a small garrison and a single frigate can see and strike, at a fraction of the cost of more crewed ships.

N41 Powers to bring drones down

Give the armed forces and the police clear legal powers to detect, jam, seize and destroy drones over defined critical sites under a single framework of authorisation, and make flying a drone over such a site without permission a serious offence. Counter-drone systems will be tested through the national proving network set out in the autonomy mission.

12 Commitments Britain will end or reduce

A strategy is defined as much by what it stops as by what it starts. Two present commitments do not serve the tasks in N1 and will be ended or reduced, alongside the changes to the army's armour in N28.

N42 An end to military support for Ukraine

Britain has committed £3 billion a year in military support to Ukraine until 2030–31 and has pledged to help lead a multinational force in Ukraine after a ceasefire. The case for that support is that weakening Russia serves Britain's own security, and it deserves a direct answer.

The war has worn down Russia's army, but the threats Russia poses to Britain lie at sea, under the sea, in the air and through sabotage. Its submarines in the North Atlantic, its intelligence ships over British cables and its long-range missiles have not been reduced by the war on land, and the Northern Fleet has been largely untouched by it. The states of continental Europe, whose borders the Russian army

threatens, have the greater stake in the land war and together have the economic weight to sustain Ukraine. Britain's distinctive contribution lies in the North Atlantic, where no other European state can take its place, and its own forces there are too thin for the threat they face. £3 billion a year is more than the cost of building a Type 26 frigate every year.

On that comparison, Britain gains more security from spending the money on the forces that meet the threats it faces directly than from continuing to fund the land war. Britain will bring its military support to Ukraine to an end, completing contracts already signed, and will not commit forces to the multinational force. The training of Ukrainian recruits in Britain will end with it. The force plan will publish the schedule on which the money is released as signed contracts complete, and all of it will be returned to Britain's own tasks.

N43 A smaller presence in the Middle East

Reduce the standing air and land operations in Iraq and Syria and around the Gulf to what the force plan requires. Keep the naval base in Bahrain and access to Duqm in Oman, which support the forward-based frigates in N5 and the protection of the sea routes through the Gulf and the Red Sea, and keep the sovereign base areas in Cyprus.

13 People

N44 Crews before hulls

The navy will not buy ships it cannot crew. Recruitment and retention will be planned with the fleet, and the force plan in N2 will show the people required for each task alongside the equipment. Sailors will be given predictable time at sea and at home. The Royal Naval Reserve will be expanded, with places for merchant seafarers and for engineers and specialists from industry. A single career path will allow people to move between the Royal Navy, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the merchant service without loss of seniority or pension.

14 Territorial application

Defence is reserved, and the measures in this paper apply across the United Kingdom. The overseas territories are a British responsibility for defence and external affairs.

FIELD	APPLICATION
Armed forces, procurement and the force plan	United Kingdom
Shipbuilding	United Kingdom, with yards in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland
Undersea Infrastructure Act	United Kingdom, its territorial sea and its exclusive economic zone
Counter-drone powers	United Kingdom, with police powers in Scotland and Northern Ireland agreed with the devolved governments
Merchant shipping and tonnage tax	United Kingdom
Falklands, South Georgia and the British Antarctic Territory	Defence by the United Kingdom, with territory legislation where required

15 Legislation and delivery

Most of the programme is delivered through the force plan, the Spending Review and contracts placed by the Ministry of Defence, without legislation.

INSTRUMENT	MEASURES	CONTENT
Statement of tasks and force plan	N1 to N4	The tasks, the costed force plan and the rules for the lowest cost
Spending Review and Estimates	N3, N5 to N12, N27 to N40, N42 to N44	The defence budget, the fleet, the army and air force, drones, the commitments ended and people
Shipbuilding plan	N13 to N15	The thirty-year plan, export and the supply chain
Undersea Infrastructure Bill	N18	Offences, powers to board and inspect, reporting duties and insurance checks
Amendments to the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021	N41	Counter-drone powers for the armed forces and the police, the offence over critical sites and testing rules
Finance Bill	N16, N17	Changes to the tonnage tax regime for the strategic reserve and training
Treaties and agreements	N22 to N26	AUKUS arrangements, Type 26 cooperation and defence provisions in charter city treaties

16 Cost and funding

This paper sets out the force the tasks require rather than a full costing, which will follow in the force plan. Much of the fleet in it is already ordered or planned, including the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates, the Dreadnought and SSN-AUKUS submarines, the Fleet Solid Support ships and the Atlantic Bastion programme. Its additional cost lies mainly in the second batch of Type 31 frigates, an air defence successor to the Type 45, enough F-35B aircraft to fill the carriers, munitions stocks, the strategic merchant reserve and the people to crew them. Ending military support for Ukraine releases up to £3 billion a year as signed contracts complete, on a schedule the force plan will publish. The savings from a smaller presence in the Middle East will be set out in the force plan by the detachments and operations that end. Holding armour at the 148 tanks already planned prevents growth rather than producing a saving against the existing plan.

Several other papers draw on the defence budget. The funding note in Building British Industry assigns between £1.5 billion and £2.5 billion a year of defence money to the defence work of the AI laboratory, the defence branch of the space programme and a share of sovereign computing, and the industry missions rely on a tenth of equipment procurement going to new technologies. These sit within the force plan and are counted once, so that the same increase in defence spending is not allocated twice.

The government's own plan for defence already falls short of its spending commitments, with several billion pounds unfunded when it was published. Today's plans fund defence at around 2.6 to 2.7 per cent of national income. The additions in this paper, once the redirection of military support for Ukraine is allowed for, are estimated at a few billion pounds a year above those plans, and with a margin for the overruns that defence programmes routinely incur the programme is planned at around 3 per cent.

Reaching the full 3.5 per cent would cost about £25 billion a year more than today's plans, on the estimate of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and will be spent only if the force plan shows that the tasks require it. Every pound will be spent where the force plan shows it meets a task at the lowest cost, and the rules in N4 are designed to reduce what the tasks cost to meet. If the budget falls short of the plan, the tasks at the bottom of the list will be met with fewer forces or not at all, rather than spreading every cut across every task.

17 Phasing

Phasing is set out in years from taking office.

PHASE	WHAT HAPPENS
First months in office	Publish the statement of tasks. Bring forward the replacement ice patrol ship. Begin the force plan and the thirty-year shipbuilding plan. Introduce the Undersea Infrastructure Bill and the counter-drone powers. Announce the end of military support for Ukraine and set the deadline for Ajax.
Year one	Publish the costed force plan and the shipbuilding plan. Order the second batch of Type 31 frigates. Choose the Type 45 successor after comparing the planned distributed system with a Type 26 derivative. Set up the strategic merchant reserve. Establish the national counter-drone shield. Decide the future of Ajax. Reduce the presence in the Middle East.
Years 2 to 5	Bring the first Type 26 and Type 31 frigates into service. Base a frigate in the Falklands. Expand the submarine docks. Build up munitions stocks and production. Bring the replacement ice patrol ship into service. Equip every combat unit with drones. Fit DragonFire across the escort fleet. Deploy anti-ship missiles in the Falklands.
Years 6 to 10	Complete the Type 26 and first Type 31 programmes. Bring the Fleet Solid Support ships and the first Dreadnought submarines into service. Begin building the Type 45 successor. Field uncrewed vessels in numbers.
Within fifteen years	About two dozen crewed escorts in service with an uncrewed fleet alongside them. The first SSN-AUKUS submarines in service. The Amphibious Transport Ship in service.

Summary of measures

AREA	MEASURE
Tasks	A published statement of the armed forces' tasks in priority order, a force plan costed against each task, a budget that follows the plan with 3.5 per cent as a ceiling rather than a target and six rules for the lowest cost
Escorts	Complete the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates, order a second batch of five Type 31 frigates for the distant stations and replace the Type 45 with the air defence system the force plan shows best meets the task
Submarines	Complete the Astute and Dreadnought classes, build up to twelve SSN-AUKUS and expand the submarine docks
Carriers	Keep both carriers with one always ready and a standing role in the Atlantic, fill the air groups with F-35B and add uncrewed aircraft
Patrol and survey	Keep the offshore patrol vessels overseas, replace the ice patrol ship early and rebuild hydrographic survey
Uncrewed and undersea	An uncrewed fleet for surveillance, mine clearance and seabed protection and the Atlantic Bastion in full

AREA	MEASURE
Amphibious	Keep the Royal Marines and the Bay-class ships and accelerate the Amphibious Transport Ship with the Netherlands
Support and munitions	Fleet Solid Support ships, a fully crewed Royal Fleet Auxiliary and munitions stocks and production sized to the tasks
Industry	A thirty-year shipbuilding plan, a national export effort and secure supply of critical components
Army	The NATO division and Estonia kept without expansion, armour sized to the division, a deadline for Ajax, home air defence, anti-ship missiles and light forces that go by sea
Air force	Home air defence, GCAP with crewed aircraft reduced only as uncrewed ones prove themselves, more maritime patrol aircraft and an E-7 fleet sized to the tasks
Drones and counter-drone	Drones in every unit bought as munitions, rolling orders that sustain British production, a national counter-drone shield, lasers at sea, uncrewed defence for the territories and clear powers to bring drones down
Commitments	An end to military support for Ukraine and a smaller presence in the Middle East
Merchant fleet and seabed	A strategic reserve of British ships, more British seafarers and an Undersea Infrastructure Act
Territories	A Falklands garrison able to hold alone, a forward-based frigate, a sovereign air bridge through Ascension and a regular presence around South Georgia and in Antarctica
Anglosphere	AUKUS as a permanent alliance, a shared Type 26 family, a presence in the Indo-Pacific through submarines, patrol ships and industry and leadership in the North Atlantic and the High North
Charter cities	Defence provisions in each founding charter and port services for the navy on commercial terms
People	Crews before hulls, an expanded naval reserve and a single career path across the navy, the auxiliary and the merchant service