

Britain to develop new long-range Nightfall ballistic missiles for Ukraine

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In a major step aimed at prolonging NATO's war with Russia in Ukraine—which has now lasted almost four years—Britain's Ministry of Defence (MoD) has announced it will “rapidly develop” a ground-launched deep-strike ballistic missile intended for use by Ukrainian forces.

Defence Minister John Healey has said the new ballistic missile could carry a 200kg warhead over a range of more than 500 kilometres (310 miles) and would “provide Ukraine a long-range punch to counter Russian aggression.” This would place Moscow in striking distance of the new weapons.

Healey's statement added that the “missiles will be capable of being launched from a range of vehicles, firing multiple missiles in quick succession and withdrawing within minutes—allowing Ukrainian forces to hit key military targets before Russian forces can respond.”

The Nightfall project was launched officially last August in a government commission asking companies whether they could meet the missile's technical requirements. The project was described as building “on the UK's ironclad commitment to Ukraine, particularly to its long-range capabilities, through the gifting of thousands of deep-strike one-way attack drones.”

By March this year, the MoD said, three industry teams would each “be awarded a £9 million development contract to design, develop and deliver their first three missiles within 12 months for test firings.”

The cost of the missiles is staggering, with a slated production rate of 10 systems per month and a maximum price of £800,000 per missile. For context, while the Starmer government imposes pay restraint throughout the National Health Service, the cost of a

single Nightfall missile would pay for the annual salary of up to 25 NHS nurses.

Supplying such missiles is crucial for the European powers as they seek a continuation of the war.

Ukraine has so far received Storm Shadow cruise missiles from the UK (with a range of 250km or 160 miles) and ATACMS ballistic missiles from the US (with a range of 300 kilometres or 186 miles). They have become increasingly important to Ukrainian strategy, used to target Russian military and industrial infrastructure well behind the front lines.

Besides having a longer range than either Storm Shadows or ATACMS, the Nightfalls could fill the gap left if Ukraine's stock of the American-made missile is not resupplied. It remains unclear how many ATACMS Ukraine has left, with US officials in recent months expressing concern that their own stockpiles are being depleted.

According to an Associated Press report last March, “A U.S. official said the U.S. provided fewer than 40 of those missiles overall and that Ukraine ran out of them in late January.”

Nightfall missiles were, in Healey's words, necessary to “keep Ukraine in the fight” and to “put leading-edge weapons into the hands of Ukrainians.”

His comment, “you defend your cities by having layers of defence, and you partly defend by being able to attack,” underscores that British and European support for Ukraine is aimed at using the country as a platform for offensives against Russia.

The Project Nightfall timetable follows an agreement between Britain and France earlier this month to establish and protect “military hubs” across Ukraine following any ceasefire agreement between Ukraine and Russia. That long-range missiles could be central to these hubs is proof of the plan to develop Ukraine as a

forward base for NATO, armed to the teeth.

The European NATO powers are developing their own long-range land-based missiles. Launched in July 2024, the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA)—comprising France, Germany, Italy, the UK, Sweden, Poland and the Netherlands—is expected to play a key role in Europe’s defence posture by the 2030s.

Amid US threats to withdraw military support from NATO and Europe, ELSA aims at “strengthening ... the European defence industrial and technological base” and contributing to “strengthening the European pillar of the Alliance, for better sharing of the burden between Allies.”

Pushing forward with this rearmament programme, last May the UK and Germany announced a partnership to develop a “deep precision strike” weapon with a planned range exceeding 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles).

While ELSA remains formally intact, it is wracked by national divisions. The Defence Express news site reported this month that of the seven countries leading it, “four have already pursued their own national strategies.”

France was one of the countries to propose the establishment of ELSA. However, as Defence Express reported, “France’s 1,000-kilometre LCM cruise missile is now increasingly viewed as a purely national project, with test flights planned for 2028. Meanwhile, Paris’s plan to develop a 2,000-kilometre ballistic missile by 2030 is reportedly no longer being discussed as an area for cooperation.”

The presence of NATO troops, military hubs and long-range ballistic systems on Ukrainian soil massively elevates the risk of a direct confrontation between nuclear-armed powers. Moscow has repeatedly warned it will not accept NATO forces on Ukrainian territory, now, or as part of any US-brokered ceasefire—and would treat them as legitimate targets.

Prior to the Anglo-French pledge to deploy troops to Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the Federation Council, Russia’s upper house of parliament, December 10, “As the president [Vladimir Putin] stressed, we have no plans to fight against Europe. No plans at all. However, we will respond to any hostile steps, including the deployment of European troops to Ukraine and the seizure of Russian

assets. And we are already prepared to respond.”

Serving as the main junior partner of US imperialism, Britain has played a key role in provocations against Moscow. As Trump’s hostility to the European powers grows, it is working hard to maintain a transatlantic anti-Russian alliance.

Last week, using UK bases, joint US-British forces seized the Russian-flagged oil tanker *Marinera* in waters off Scotland. At the request of the US, a Royal Air Force surveillance plane and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel *Tideforce* took part in the operation.

The British government has used the operation as a springboard for escalating plans targeting Russia’s “shadow fleet” of oil tankers. Following the operation, Healey told Parliament that the government was “stepping up action on the [Russian] shadow fleet, developing further military options and strengthening coordination with allies.”

On Monday, *The Times* revealed that “British special forces are being lined up to storm Russian shadow fleet vessels.” The report stated that elite soldiers trained to rappel onto ships from helicopters and capture their crews could target hundreds of Russian-linked oil tankers. The Special Boat Service (SBS) is reportedly likely to lead the missions.

A “defence source” all but confirmed to the newspaper that such “seizures at sea” were being planned, stating: “If you want to dial up the economic pressure on Russia, that looks like operators fast-roping onto illegal oil tankers.”



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