

World-class autonomous minehunters to protect Royal Navy

Speaking at the Franco-British Council Defence Conference, the Defence Secretary announced a £184 million investment in the joint Maritime Mine Counter Measure (MMCM) programme, which will create new systems to combat sea mines and keep ships and personnel away from danger.

The contract will support 215 jobs across the UK at Thales sites in Somerset and Plymouth, as well as in the wider supply chain, including L3 Harris in Portsmouth, Stonehaven in Aberdeenshire and Alba Ultrasound in Glasgow.

This investment follows the substantial £16.5 billion settlement in the Spending Review for Defence over four years that will modernise the armed forces, reinvigorate the shipbuilding industry and bring jobs and prosperity to every part of the UK.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

This £184 million contract offers a huge leap forward for the Royal Navy's autonomous capabilities in the detection and defeat of sea mines. As the Armed Forces puts modernisation at the heart of its future strategy, these systems will protect vital shipping lanes, commercial traffic and our brave personnel from these deadly devices.

The programme also underpins a deep and ever-strengthening relationship with France and marks the tenth anniversary of the Lancaster House treaties between our two nations.

UK-France defence cooperation

The Defence Secretary was speaking at this year's virtual Franco-British Council Defence Conference, which also featured French defence minister Florence Parly, Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir Nick Carter and his French counterpart Ched d'État-Major des Armées François Lecointre.

This month marks the 10th anniversary of the historic Lancaster House treaties on defence, security and nuclear cooperation between the UK and France. The historic commitment has established a long-term partnership between the two countries and includes the fully operational Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) – a force able to rapidly deploy over 10,000 personnel in response to a crisis.

Both nations are deployed around the world together in places such as the Middle East combating Daesh and in Estonia as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. In Mali, three RAF Chinooks and 100 UK personnel are deployed in a non-combat role in support of French counter-extremist operations.

Royal Navy minehunting

The Royal Navy is world leader in mine countermeasures, having been regularly called upon to deal with mines and other historic ordnance, left over from the Second World War, around the United Kingdom. In recent times, the UK has been involved in minehunting operations across the world, including the Gulf and off Libya.

Following a successful demonstration phase and trials completed in October 2020, the new contract will produce three sets of minehunting equipment, consisting of:

Autonomous vessel – a boat controlled and operated from a “mother ship/base.”
Towed sonar – a sonar which is towed/dragged behind the vessel to locate ordnance.
Mine neutralisation system – a remotely operated underwater vehicle which is used once the mine is located to neutralise the device and prevent its detonation.

When used together, these three elements are known as the Primary System. This next-generation mine hunting capability is designed to potentially replace conventional crewed mine hunting vessels, such as the Royal Navy’s Hunt and Sandown class ships, with autonomous systems.

First Sea Lord Admiral Tony Radakin said:

I am enormously excited by the potential of the future minehunting capability. This will allow us to deliver minehunting more effectively, more efficiently and more safely, and to integrate even more closely with our French counterparts in this important area.

The UK element of the MMCM programme was negotiated by Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S), the procurement arm of the UK Ministry of Defence.

DE&S CEO Sir Simon Bollom said:

This ground-breaking technology brings with it a step-change in capability for the Royal Navy which is a bold step into the digital and autonomous world. I’m incredibly proud of DE&S and the Royal Navy team who have worked tirelessly with our French colleagues to deliver on this contract.

Alex Cresswell, CEO of Thales in the UK, said:

Technologies such as autonomy and AI are transforming societies and warfare at an exponential rate. This contract represents the next generation for Anglo-French minehunting, delivering a world leading capability that will keep our armed forces safe and create and

secure vital jobs across the UK and our supply chain. We look forward to delivering the next stage in this exciting hi-tech programme.

The first equipment sets are due to be delivered in late 2022. It will commence operational evaluation prior to entering service with the Royal Navy.