

OpenVoiceNews

Transparent. Unbiased. Yours.

UK Firms Drive Key Role in Global F-35 Program

August 18, 2025

– Categories: Defence & Security

The Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II is widely recognised as a leading fighter jet, but its production is a truly international effort. While the United States remains the program's primary overseer, the United Kingdom is the largest international contributor, providing around 15% of all components and covering approximately 10% of development costs.

BAE Systems, one of the UK's major defence contractors, plays a central role. The company manufactures the rear fuselage, tails, electronic warfare systems, antennae, avionics, and substantial amounts of software. BAE Systems describes its contribution as a 13–15% workshare of each aircraft, excluding propulsion. Rolls-Royce supplies the LiftSystem for the F-35B, enabling short takeoff and vertical landing (STOVL) capabilities, while Martin-Baker provides ejection seats standard across all F-35 models. Other British firms, including SELEX, Cobham, Ultra Electronics, and UTC Actuation Systems, supply avionics, communications, and actuation systems.

The F-35 program is organised into international tiers. The UK is the sole Tier 1 partner, while Italy and the Netherlands hold Tier 2 status, and countries such as Australia, Canada, Denmark, and Norway are Tier 3 partners. Japan and Israel also participate through specialised cooperative agreements or Foreign Military Sales programs. This structure ensures coordinated contributions while maintaining U.S. oversight.

Most F-35s are assembled at Lockheed Martin's Fort Worth, Texas, facility, but final assembly lines exist in Italy and Japan. The Italian facility, operated by Leonardo, is the only European final assembly and checkout facility, producing components like targeting

systems, radios, and engine parts. The Netherlands, through GKN Fokker, manufactures flaperons, doors, arresting gear, drag chutes, and manages a European spare parts pool for more than 500 aircraft.

The United Kingdom's role highlights the country's strategic importance in global defence manufacturing. Royal Navy F-35Bs operate from aircraft carriers, showcasing British engineering on an international stage. UK contributions ensure that allied forces benefit from advanced fighter technology while supporting domestic defence industry jobs.

Other international partners also play essential roles. Australia produces vertical tails and actuator systems, Canada supplies structural components, and Norway contributes pylons and leading-edge sections. Israel manufactures customised F-35I Adir variants with unique wings, helmets, and electronic warfare systems.

Overall, the F-35 program exemplifies a coordinated global effort, with the United Kingdom standing out as a leading international partner. British industry provides critical components, expertise, and innovation, underpinning the success of one of the world's most advanced multirole fighter jets.