

UK, Japan, and Italy Target 2025 Defence Pact to Launch Next-Gen Fighter

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Britain, Japan, and Italy have agreed to finalise a landmark defence contract by the end of 2025 under the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), paving the way for the development of a sixth-generation fighter jet intended to enter service by 2035. The move signals a concerted effort by the UK to secure strategic autonomy in the skies amid rising geopolitical instability.

The trilateral initiative, born out of shared defence and industrial interests, has now taken shape with the formation of a new joint venture, Edgewing. Comprising BAE Systems (UK), Leonardo (Italy), and Japan Aircraft Industrial Enhancement Co., the consortium will lead the design and manufacture of the advanced multirole aircraft. The three nations have also established a shared command centre in Reading to oversee development.

This comes at a critical juncture for the UK's aerospace sector, as the Eurofighter Typhoon production line at BAE's Warton facility faces a pause due to a lack of new orders. Defence analysts have warned that such gaps threaten the preservation of high-value defence skills unless future-proofed through programmes like GCAP.

With the F-35 fleet still growing, the UK's participation in GCAP is widely seen as a necessary hedge to reduce long-term dependence on American technology. Unlike many European nations which have fallen behind in defence innovation, the UK is actively aligning itself with like-minded partners to ensure it remains competitive in future combat air capabilities.

Under the programme's current timeline, demonstrator flights are expected around 2027, with full deployment aimed for 2035. Ministers have stressed the importance of locking in the 2025 contract deadline to maintain momentum and ensure British industry secures its share of the economic and strategic dividends. Over 3,500 UK jobs are already supported by GCAP, including over 1,000 apprenticeships.

Defence observers remain cautious about Europe's ability to sustain two competing sixth-gen projects, with France, Germany, and Spain pursuing

the rival FCAS programme. Questions remain about long-term political unity and budgetary commitment, particularly under a Labour government that has offered little clarity on industrial strategy or defence procurement priorities.

In the face of growing threats from authoritarian regimes and the rising importance of technological sovereignty, GCAP presents a clear opportunity for the UK to assert leadership. With ministers and industry working in tandem, the programme's success could define Britain's defence standing for decades to come.