

Breaking Storm!

Richard Gardner reports from London



The news that negotiations between the European 6th Generation Tempest fighter team and Japan were at an advanced stage emerged during the 2022 Farnborough International air show in July but subsequently these talks have now moved on significantly and on 9 December the governments of UK, Japan and Italy issued a joint statement announcing the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP). This elevates the trilateral partnership through what is described as “an ambitious endeavour to develop a next generation fighter aircraft by 2035”. Perhaps the most important new aspect emerging from the formalisation of the joint agreement is the confirmation that Japan’s next-generation F-X programme is to be merged into the UK-led Tempest initiative, which has already co-opted Italy, both nations looking towards an eventual replacement for their fleets of Typhoon combat aircraft. All three are also F-35 customers, and the GCAP is seen as a future complement to it in the late 2030s, but opening up longer-term opportunities to develop new technologies

and safeguard sovereign defence capabilities - and eventually seek to exploit new export potential. This is first and foremost an exercise in defence resilience. All concerned wish to continue to work closely with the USA across the broad spectrum of shared defence interests, but at the same time have recognised that becoming too reliant on adopting US equipment severely restricts their freedom of action when it comes to developing and integrating future weapons and other advanced systems.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak expressed his enthusiasm for the agreement saying, “We need to stay at the cutting edge of advancements in defence technology, outpacing and out-manoeuvring those who seek to do us harm. The international partnership we have announced today with Italy and Japan aims to do just that, underlining that the security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are indivisible.” He was visiting RAF Coningsby, a major Typhoon base, when he made his announcement adding, “The next-generation of combat aircraft we design will protect us and our allies around

the world by harnessing the strength of our world-beating defence industry, creating jobs while saving lives.”

While the US government and its aerospace sector have enjoyed a continuous close partnership with Japan in the procurement of fighter programmes over the years, involving manufacturing and assembling US designs, there are signs that there is a new understanding emerging in Washington that recognises that in countering Chinese expansionism in the Pacific it is necessary to embrace and support a wider global response. That involves looking beyond potentially threatened regional governments only looking at the supply of US aircraft and weapons. Meeting Japanese expectations for greater involvement in developing new advanced air systems is one such example. Japan wants a bigger role in the future composition of its air defence assets. On news of the new GCAP agreement there was a joint statement issued by the US Department of Defence and the Japanese Ministry of Defence which declared, “The United States supports Japan’s security and defence cooperation with likeminded allies and partners, including with the UK and Italy, two close partners of both of our countries, on the development of its next fighter aircraft.” It continued, “The US and Japan are bolstering our defence cooperation in a number of promising areas, particularly in advancing opportunities for joint research, development, testing and evaluation. Together we have begun important collaboration through a series of discussions on autonomous systems capabilities, which could complement Japan’s next fighter programme among other platforms. In this context both sides have concurred to start concrete cooperation within the next year. Such efforts between the United States and Japan greatly strengthen the US-Japan Alliance and build on our cooperation with likeminded partners, further enabling joint responses to future threats in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.”