

GCAP: Italy officially opens the door to Germany—background, costs and uncertainties surrounding the sixth-generation fighter

Published on 14/11/2026

Rome has broken the deadlock and given political approval for Berlin's entry into the **Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)**, the strategic sixth-generation fighter consortium previously led by Italy, the United Kingdom and Japan. The shift comes through an official statement from Palazzo Chigi, which denies recent press reports of alleged Italian vetoes, healing a diplomatic rift that had unsettled European capitals and Tokyo in recent weeks.

Rome's denial and the issue of "observer" status

The Meloni government's clarification responds to a report published around ten days ago by the *Financial Times*, according to which Italy had opposed Germany's full membership, relegating Berlin to an observer role only.

In its official statement, the Italian government describes that account as “entirely misleading,” clarifying the true scope of its proposal:

- **Historic openness:** Rome reiterates that it has always supported expanding the program to include Germany, a position also confirmed during the latest videoconference among the partners.
- **Acceleration without delays:** Initial observer status was intended solely to facilitate the immediate exchange of information and speed the path toward full membership, without limiting Berlin’s future political or industrial weight or slowing the project’s timetable.

Diplomatic tensions between London, Rome and Tokyo

Behind the conciliatory statement, however, lies a month of sharp friction. It all began in early October, when British Prime Minister Andy Burnham, during a visit with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, informally invited Germany into GCAP without consulting either Rome or Tokyo in advance.

London’s unilateral move deeply irritated the other two partners, prompting them to demand an official apology—which subsequently came in the form of a clarification—but for different reasons:

- **Japan’s concerns:** Tokyo is watching China’s rapid rearmament with extreme concern and demands absolute adherence to the deadline for delivering the first aircraft, set for **2035**. In Japanese eyes, the entry of a new partner could complicate and delay development.
- **Italy’s industrial concerns:** Rome aims to protect the balance in workshare and contract allocation, already delicate among the program’s three current industrial giants: Italy’s **Leonardo**, Britain’s **BAE Systems** and Japan’s **Mitsubishi**.

The collapse of FCAS and Berlin’s alternatives

The courtship between Berlin and GCAP has its roots in the crisis of the rival Franco-German **FCAS** project.As early as a year and a half ago, *Corriere della Sera* was the first to reveal Germany’s interest in the Italian-British-Japanese consortium, triggering the ire of the Élysée Palace and a letter of protest from French President Emmanuel Macron to Friedrich Merz, a prelude to the official split that occurred a few months later.

Despite Italy’s openness, Germany’s final decision is still far from certain:

- **The Sweden option:** The German Defense expert committee currently recommends avoiding GCAP and instead pursuing a new alliance with Sweden's **Saab**, manufacturer of the Gripen fighter jet.
- **The impossibility of going it alone:** Unlike France, which intends to proceed independently, Germany does not possess the technological expertise needed to develop a sixth-generation fighter on its own.

Staggering costs and Airbus's industrial stake

GCAP — described as a «system of systems» because it is conceived as a veritable «flying aircraft carrier» capable of coordinating satellites, drones, radars, and ground forces — has an estimated value of more than one hundred billion euros .

Germany's potential entry has two economic and industrial implications:

1. **Relief for public finances:** Sharing the investment with Berlin would ease the financial burden on Rome and, above all, London, whose public coffers are already at the limit of sustainability.
2. **Renegotiating contracts:** Germany's arrival would entail **Airbus** joining the production supply chain — as confirmed by recent contacts between BAE Systems and Airbus itself, revealed last week by the *Financial Times* — forcing the current industrial partners to relinquish shares of the work.