



Sixth-Generation Fighter: Is the GCAP Program Really a Luxury We Can Afford?

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While European Defense budgets grapple with the harsh reality of public spending, welfare, and constant strategic revisions, Italy – along with Great Britain and Japan – has embarked on the **Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)** for the development of the Tempest, the sixth-generation fighter.

But the question arises spontaneously, and it is almost a moral and financial obligation to ask: **is it really worth investing astronomical sums in such an enterprise**, when the current state of the Army's means and materials is in dire conditions and crucial sectors for our operational survival are still completely uncovered?



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The Numbers of the "Flight": A Merciless Comparison with the F-35

According to industry analyses, including those reported by *Difesanews*, the mere phase of design and conceptual development of the GCAP has an estimated cost of around **18 billion euros**.

To give a tangible proportion of this figure, it is the exact same amount that Italy has allocated in total for the entire **F-35 Lightning II** program. We are talking about a fifth-generation fighter already operational, purchased in dozens of units, with active assembly lines (the FACO in Cameri) and concrete capabilities. In the case of the Tempest, the 18 billion would cover *only the drawings and design* of an aircraft that, if all goes well, will see the light in the next decade.

At a time when resources allocated to Defense are under the pressure of social spending and linear cuts, investing such a fortune on a "blank sheet" appears as a risky gamble.



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The Lessons of History: The Ghosts of Tornado and Typhoon

Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, and the history of aeronautical cooperation in the United Kingdom and Italy is not without its shadows. The idea that the GCAP is a guaranteed success clashes with industrial precedents:

- **The Tornado (Tonka):** Developed with great ambitions for low-altitude flight, it proved to be an expensive means with serious vulnerabilities. During the Gulf War of 1991, the low-flight tactic cost the downing of 8 Tornados out of 48 employed against a serious air defense. The fighter version (ADV) was for years considered an inadequate means, burdened by enormous maintenance costs also due to the complex variable geometry of the wings.
- **The Typhoon (Eurofighter):** Entered into actual service with years of delay, when it finally arrived in the RAF and Italian Air Force units, it was technologically a generation behind the American state of the art (the F-22 Raptor had been flying for two years). Moreover, born as a purely air-to-air fighter, it took almost a decade before it could express real ground attack capabilities, forcing the ministries to keep the old Tornados alive with management costs disproportionate to more flexible and economical alternatives (like the Harriers).

A Pretentious Enterprise: Isolated from Western Giants

The ambition of the GCAP appears even more pretentious when looking at the geopolitical and industrial chessboard. Italy and Great Britain (with the strategic but geographically remote addition of Japan) are trying to develop technology comparable to that of the United States **without the United States**, but also **without Germany and without France**, who have preferred to join forces in the competing FCAS project (*Future Combat Air System*).

Without the economic and technological pull of Washington, and separated from the two main industrial engines of continental Europe, Rome and London risk finding themselves isolated in a restricted market, with per capita production costs inevitably destined to soar.



The Real Priorities: Drones, Missile Shields, and C-UAS

If the Defense blanket is short, choosing where to pull it is a vital strategic decision. Modern high-intensity conflicts are showing that air superiority is no longer achieved solely with piloted jets, but with the ability to saturate the opponent and, symmetrically, to defend against asymmetric and technological threats from the sky.

Today Italy finds itself uncovered on three critical fronts:

1. **The Unmanned Sector (Drones):** The need to create serious drone forces, both for reconnaissance and attack (loiter munition), is now imperative. It is a sector in which the Army and other armed forces have a long way to go and which requires immediate investments.

2. **Missile Defense:** The protection of critical infrastructures and cities from attacks with ballistic and cruise missiles has become the absolute priority of any national security doctrine. Updating and multiplying medium and long-range air defense systems has vertiginous costs that directly compete with Tempest funds.
3. **C-UAS Systems (Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems):** As the most recent operational theaters teach, swarms of modified commercial drones or cheap suicide drones can paralyze entire armored units or destroy strategic rear areas. The Army urgently needs to equip itself with a comprehensive C-UAS defense – both kinetic and electronic (jamming) – to protect its means and materials in the field.

While conventional forces suffer from a shortage of ammunition, modern vehicles, and protective shields, and with the Defense budget constantly in balance, does it make sense to cut what is needed today to finance a phantom fighter that might fly tomorrow?

The Strategic Dilemma: Renouncing or drastically downsizing the GCAP program would allow for the immediate release of billions of euros. Resources that could be allocated to fill the material gaps of the Army, create a credible drone fleet, and, above all, finance a dense network of missile defense and C-UAS to shield the national skies.

Continuing down this path, chasing an isolated industrial ambition and ignoring the real and urgent defensive needs of our front line, risks turning the Tempest into yet another billion-dollar "announced disaster" in European military history.