

Defence Committee

The Global Combat Air Programme: Government Response

Second Special Report of Session 2024–25

HC 799

Defence Committee

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Second Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Third Report of Session 2024–25, [The Global Combat Air Programme](#) (HC 598) on 14 January 2025. The Government’s response was received on 14 March 2025 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

1. We welcome the establishment of the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), which will be one of the UK’s most significant defence programmes over the next decade and beyond. If delivered as planned, GCAP will enable the UK to retain national sovereignty in combat air, providing a vital military capability in an increasingly volatile world. We also recognise the opportunities the programme brings to deepen the UK’s relationships with its allies and to shore up defence industrial capacity. (Conclusion, Paragraph 13)

We welcome the Committee’s assessment of Global Combat Air Programme’s (GCAP) military and strategic importance. GCAP is being designed to ensure the UK is able to outmatch adversaries for decades to come, incorporating the most advanced technologies to deliver a sixth-generation capability as part of a more integrated and effective force. The programme is also important as we develop the Defence Industrial Strategy. As the Committee outlines, it is key to retaining national sovereignty in combat air, maintaining our ability to acquire and operate the capabilities we need and preserving the underpinning skills and technologies. Through GCAP, and the wider Future Combat Air System (FCAS), we are working to retain and grow a cutting-edge defence industrial base and bolster the UK’s international influence. GCAP is a catalyst for investment in science and engineering skills and research and development (R&D), with over 3,500 people already working on GCAP in the UK alone.

2. The Committee's visits to Japan and Italy inspired great confidence in the commitment and capabilities of both our international partners. In particular, recognising that involvement in GCAP entails a significant step both politically and militarily for Japan, the Committee was impressed by the depth of the Japanese offer and the technical progress they have made to date. (Conclusion, Paragraph 15)

The Department shares the Committee's assessment of the commitment and capabilities of our international partners. Both Japan and Italy have extensive technological and industrial capabilities, which informed the decision to form the GCAP partnership. Japan has invested heavily in combat air R&D and the UK and Italy have the shared experience of delivering advanced combat air capabilities through partnerships including joint work on Typhoon. The political, military and industrial relationships underpinning the programme have proven highly effective and we look forward to making further progress as we embark upon the next phase of the programme together.

3. An open-minded but cautious approach should be taken to including new international partners within GCAP. The potential benefits will need to be weighed carefully against the risks, with any proposed partnering opportunity carefully assessed on its own merits. Any additional partnering arrangements that could jeopardise the 2035 in-service date should not be contemplated. (Recommendation, Paragraph 21)

The GCAP international partnership was formed following substantial assessment of UK, Japanese and Italian requirements and industrial capabilities, to ensure each would contribute to successful delivery of the programme. The UK, Japan and Italy are open to further partners, and are clear that this must similarly be driven by the needs of the programme and its agreed timeline.

4. Given the ambitious timescales for GCAP, its delivery structures at the Governmental and industrial levels will need to be sufficiently empowered to take timely and binding decisions as the programme progresses. A repeat of the structural failings which contributed to unnecessary delay and cost on the Eurofighter Typhoon would place the programme in jeopardy. We are encouraged that this imperative has been recognised by both the MOD and industry. It was clear from our visit to Italy that they, having also experienced the delays that had been caused on Typhoon, had drawn the same conclusions—and meeting the 2035 target date is critical for Japan. This early commitment to empowering GCAP's delivery organisations must be sustained throughout the programme's development if it is to succeed. (Conclusion, Paragraph 29)

The Department and our international partners have actively learned from previous programmes and agree that an empowered joint delivery organisation will be essential to the successful and timely delivery of the programme. The Treaty underpinning the establishment of the GCAP International Government Organisation (GIGO),¹ which was ratified by all three partners in 2024, lays the framework for an empowered international organisation that can plan and deliver the programme effectively, with decisions made quickly and at the appropriate level. All three countries are committed to ensuring that this spirit of empowerment is implemented as we progress the establishment of the GIGO, while ensuring avenues exist to effectively engage home governments in a coordinated and effective way when required.

5. We support an element of flexibility in workshare arrangements for GCAP, whilst also recognising the need for all three nations involved to be, and be seen to be, equal partners over the course of the programme. (Conclusion, Paragraph 36)

6. Care must be taken to ensure that any flexibility around workshare is exercised within a clearly defined framework to avoid unnecessarily reopening negotiations and introducing delay. (Recommendation, Paragraph 37)

The GCAP partnership was formed on the basis of the strong industrial and technological capabilities of the UK, Japan and Italy, all of which contribute meaningfully and substantially to our shared aim of delivering a next-generation combat aircraft. Together, we have undertaken robust concepting and assessment activity since 2022, when the partnership was announced, aligning joint requirements to industrial capability and schedule. This provides the framework within which discussions take place as to how each country can contribute most effectively to the shared endeavour, supporting both the schedule and affordability.

UK, Japanese and Italian lead industry partners have chosen an empowered Joint Venture (JV), with joint teams working closely to develop joint IP, as the most effective way to deliver the programme. This approach means greater cooperation between industry teams and the flexibility to bring the best from each country into the programme. In this way, international industry partnering bolsters the sovereign capabilities of each country, supporting our individual and collective Freedom of Action and Freedom of Modification.

¹ [Convention on the establishment of the 'Global Combat Air Programme \(GCAP\) - International Government Organisation', 14 December 2024, Gov.uk](#)

7. With the defence budget under increasing pressure, it is incumbent on both Government and industry to keep tight control of costs as GCAP progresses. As more detailed information on programme costs becomes available, it must be made available to Parliament and the public in a timely and transparent manner to enable effective scrutiny. The Government should consider providing a multi-year funding arrangement to put the programme on a secure footing and provide international partners with confidence in the UK's ongoing commitment. (Recommendation, Paragraph 47)

The Department welcomes the opportunity to update Parliament on delivery of the programme and is committed to transparency to support proper scrutiny. We take seriously considerations around how to deliver the programme in the most cost-effective and efficient manner and thank the Committee for its recommendation. All international partners are committed to the delivery of the programme, as has been reflected through Ministerial announcements made by each, and we will actively sustain this confidence as the programme progresses.

The Committee is right to highlight the need to proactively manage costs. This is a ground-breaking programme that is in the latter part of the Concept and Assessment Phase, during which we are defining the capabilities we require through rigorous assessment of future military requirements, technologies, and realistic costs and schedules to deliver them. The programme is being delivered through a new international construct involving a wide range of industry partners with diverse supply chains. We recognise the scale of the challenge and are actively pursuing means to manage costs, including de-risking the programme through early investment in R&D and skills generation, delivering at a faster pace than previous programmes, and maintaining a culture of greater transparency between Government and industry partners. Prioritisation of time, and a commitment to incremental capability development, will help the programme deliver the capabilities required against the schedule.

8. If political and public support for GCAP is to be maintained, it is essential that the Government not only makes the case for its necessity as a military capability, but also promotes the broader economic benefits that it will bring. (Recommendation, Paragraph 48)

The Department thanks the Committee for its recommendation and agrees on the importance of highlighting GCAP's wider economic benefits. The programme is already delivering significant economic and industrial benefits across the UK and we will continue to highlight this to Parliament and the public. We continue to invest in R&D through the FCAS Technology Initiative (FCAS TI), to grow the advanced skills and technologies required to deliver a next-generation combat aircraft. The MOD has invested heavily

in FCAS TI, with over £600 million invested to date by our UK industry partners, supporting advanced design and development facilities with long-term benefit to the combat air sector. There are now over 3,500 people working on the programme across the UK, with major combat air hubs in the south-west and north-west of England and in Edinburgh, supported by a supply chain of hundreds of organisations spread across the country. The programme is important to sustaining the UK's strong international position in combat air exports, which regularly account for over half of the UK's total defence exports. GCAP's crucial role in sustaining and growing the UK's combat air defence industrial base, and delivering a range of wider economic benefits important to the growth mission, are being taken into account as we develop the Defence Industrial Strategy.

9. The Committee was greatly encouraged by Japan's recognition of the importance of exports to their GCAP partners. Nonetheless, Japan's inexperience as a defence exporter is likely to present unique challenges for GCAP which were not in evidence for Typhoon. The UK government must continue to support and encourage Japan in making the necessary legislative and industrial progress to ensure that the new GCAP fighter can be successfully exported. (Recommendation, Paragraph 56)

The Department welcomes the Committee's recognition of the importance of exportability. As a sector, combat air regularly accounts for the majority of the value of UK defence exports, delivering substantial economic returns to the UK. The importance of future exports is recognised in the Treaty to establish the joint international government organisation that will deliver the programme, which was signed and ratified by all partners. We are working to ensure GCAP is well-placed to win future export orders, while maintaining the integrity of our commitments to international arms control obligations. We are confident in all partners' support for GCAP exports and that they are putting in place the means, including policy measures, to achieve them.

10. Our recent report on Developing AI Expertise and Capacity in UK Defence examined some of the challenges and opportunities presented by the use of artificial intelligence in defence. These are not exclusive to the air domain, but they will need to be carefully managed as GCAP progresses. The Government must ensure that GCAP is future proofed so that it can not only accommodate advances in our own AI capabilities, but also counter those of our adversaries. (Recommendation, Paragraph 67)

11. There are many unresolved questions about how best to harness Autonomous Collaborative Platforms (ACPs) alongside the existing and future combat fleet, with the development of advanced uncrewed platforms in particular requiring significant further work. Given these

uncertainties it is essential that sufficient flexibility is built into GCAP to allow for the main aircraft to operate alongside a range of future uncrewed solutions. (Recommendation, Paragraph 74)

The Department is grateful to the Committee for its recommendation and agrees that our future combat air capabilities must be able to adopt AI and autonomous technologies as they develop. These technologies will augment the capabilities of both the core GCAP aircraft and the additional uncrewed platforms that we envisage operating alongside it as part of the UK's wider FCAS. In the core platform, they will enhance the effectiveness of both aircraft and pilot, tasking sensors, triaging data, and analysing high-intensity combat situations. Within wider FCAS, these technologies will be fundamental to allowing future uncrewed platforms to operate both with a high degree of autonomy and as part of an integrated system of capabilities.

Adoption of these and other next-generation capabilities will be enabled by a design-approach that supports continuous spiral upgrades. Defence-wide architecture and data standards are needed to achieve the greatest military advantage. Importantly, GCAP is supporting a pathway for advancing AI and autonomous technologies that will be key to the development of uncrewed systems. Monitoring adversaries' development and employment of these technologies is key to ensuring delivery of a combat air capability that can fight and win in the battle spaces of the future, which is why we are designing a capability with rapid upgradability at its core.

12. The Hawk trainer aircraft has been a UK defence export success story, but with domestic production lines closing four years ago the skills and manufacturing capacity which had built up over decades will prove challenging and costly to regenerate. We recognise that innovative training solutions, including modular aircraft and synthetics, may offer new opportunities for industry; but we find the failure to capitalise on the success of Hawk remarkably short-sighted and deeply regrettable. (Conclusion, Paragraph 82)

The Programme of Record for Hawk T2 was for an out of service date (OSD) of 2040, which allowed for time potentially to design and build a follow-on successor for Hawk in the Advanced Jet Training role. However, recent events have led to an investigation of Hawk output and likely performance to that OSD. It has been assessed that further investment will be required for Hawk T2 to make an OSD of 2040, and alternative options to the Programme of Record are being assessed to ensure the best outcomes for Defence.

13. Building and maintaining a skilled workforce will be crucial to GCAP's success. With the defence industry facing fierce competition from other sectors for skilled workers, it is essential that a holistic approach is

taken to recruitment and retention. GCAP offers a welcome opportunity to attract new talent into the UK's combat air industry, but the focus cannot just be on the recruitment of new apprentices into industry primes. (Conclusion, Paragraph 91)

The Committee is right to emphasise the breadth of skills required to ensure GCAP's success. Sustaining and growing the skills base is not only critical for delivery of the programme; it underpins the wider Defence Industrial Strategy and growth mission. Ensuring GCAP is enabled by the skills and technologies required has been a priority for the Department and our industry partners since the programme's inception. This is why, together, we launched and co-funded the FCAS Technology Initiative R&D programme. This has enabled industry to grow the number of people working on the programme at the required pace and has ensured they have the necessary skills.

We recognise the need to attract talent from beyond the combat air industry and are undertaking strategic workforce planning to understand the programme's future skills requirements and options to meet them. We are proactively growing the skills pipeline, working with academia and wider Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) initiatives, communicating the exciting and purposeful career opportunities GCAP presents to attract our future workforce. Recruitment of the right skills is essential, but so too is their retention, which is why we are working hard to ensure we retain a positive and inclusive culture. The MOD and our core industry partners recognise the importance of generating skills in the supply chain, which now includes hundreds of organisations, from universities to small and medium-sized enterprises.

14. Retention of the existing Typhoon manufacturing workforce, made more challenging by dwindling production runs and the gap until full-scale production of Tempest is underway, must be a priority; and securing further Typhoon export orders to ensure a consistent pipeline of production will be critical to achieving this goal. (Recommendation, Paragraph 92)

GCAP is building on the Typhoon skills base to develop new industrial techniques and technologies, in both design and manufacturing. At the same time, the MOD continues to invest in Typhoon to maintain the Royal Air Force's cutting-edge military capability, as well as supporting our industry partners in pursuing export opportunities.

These export opportunities play an important role in supporting the maintenance of the UK's combat air production lines in advance of GCAP. The MOD and industry are currently pursuing several major Typhoon export campaigns which, if successful, would see a significant number of orders. Given the UK's workshare in Typhoon, this would translate into a

pipeline of work that would bolster our highly skilled workforce for years to come. Export success could also come from our Eurofighter Partners, who are pursuing their own campaigns in tandem. Domestic orders for more aircraft are also being placed and UK industry will play a major role in their production. These orders underline the confidence of our partners that Typhoon will remain the backbone of their combat air fleets for decades.

Should there however be any gap in final assembly production lines, BAE Systems have a plan in place to deploy staff across the wider Typhoon programme and other complex combat air programmes in their business. This will maintain jobs and skills and mitigate against the risk of losing an expert manufacturing workforce.

15. Whilst progress to date has been positive, previous multilateral defence programmes have frequently seen costs spiral and delays pile up and GCAP will have to break the mould if it is to achieve its ambitious target date. Decisions made at this early stage around partnerships, delivery structures and workshare by both Government and industry will be key to ensuring the aircraft arrives on time and to budget; and the importance of recruiting and retaining a suitably skilled workforce cannot be understated. The recommendations in this report are intended to help ensure that GCAP's potential is fully realised. We will continue to provide robust scrutiny of the programme as it proceeds. (Conclusion, Paragraph 94)

We are grateful to the Committee for its report and the conclusions and recommendations within. GCAP has been designed from the outset to learn lessons from previous programmes, to deliver one of Defence's most important and complex programmes. GCAP requires sustained commitment and delivery across HMG and our industry partners. This is an exciting and critical time for the future of UK combat air and success in GCAP is essential to meeting our sovereign and military requirements. We are fully motivated by the opportunity to work with our international partners to develop a next generation combat air capability that will outmatch our adversaries and deliver for our economies for decades to come. We look forward to working with Parliament in an open and transparent manner so that the progress and benefits of GCAP are fully understood.