

Aerospace & Defence

Fighter jet project on course for 2035 deadline despite Saudi overture

Riyadh's request to join trilateral project will not hold up development of next-generation aircraft, BAE executive says



An artist's impression of the next-generation fighter jet being developed under the Global Combat Air Programme © BAE Systems

Sylvia Pfeifer in Warton, **Kana Inagaki** in Tokyo and **Samer Al-Atrush** in Dubai 8 HOURS AGO

A landmark project involving the UK, Italy and Japan to develop a next-generation fighter aircraft by 2035 will stick to its current timetable despite Saudi Arabia's request to join the initiative, according to one of the project's industrial partners.

Herman Claesen, managing director of Future Combat Air Systems at [BAE Systems](#), the British industrial group, said 2035 was a "fundamental requirement" of the programme for all three nations.

"They are absolutely committed to that requirement," he told the Financial Times.

Asked whether there was a risk that the 2035 date might slip given Saudi Arabia's request, Claesen said "absolutely not".

The FT [revealed](#) earlier this month that the Gulf kingdom had pushed to become a full partner in the Global Combat Air Programme. Under the project, launched last December, the UK, Italy and Japan agreed jointly to build a next-generation fighter jet by 2035 to address increasing security threats from China and Russia.

But Riyadh's request has created tensions in the alliance, with Japan opposed to its membership while the UK and Italy are open to the idea.

Tokyo is concerned that having a fourth member in the alliance could delay the

Tokyo is concerned that having a fourth member in the alliance could delay the already-tight deadline. The countries are aiming to develop the aircraft in roughly half the time it took to build the Eurofighter Typhoon, by using advanced manufacturing methods and digital tools.



Herman Claesen, managing director of Future Combat Air Systems at BAE Systems, played down suggestions of either France or Germany joining, noting 'there was no talk about that' © BAE Systems

Claesen said the talks on Riyadh's bid were being held at government level and that BAE's focus was on delivering the programme on time, although it was "supporting the UK government with their conversations".

Saudi Arabia has been a leading purchaser of combat aircraft from the UK since the mid-1980s, including the Eurofighter Typhoons built by a consortium including BAE Systems, and has been looking to build a domestic defence industry. UK defence officials have previously told the FT the kingdom is viewed as a "key partner" in GCAP. Saudi Arabia could also bring money and engineering expertise to the project.

Japan's defence ministry said in a statement to the FT that the door was open for the involvement of another country in GCAP, but on condition there would be no delay in the development schedule. It also said Japan would make efforts to strengthen [defence](#) ties with Saudi Arabia, which is the country's biggest oil supplier. The ministry declined to comment on whether Tokyo would support or oppose Saudi involvement.

The UK defence ministry said it was “committed to delivering this world-leading fighter jet alongside our partners by 2035”.

The Saudi government did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

Claesen said other nations were also interested in involvement in GCAP. While securing export orders was a key part of the programme, the question of how and whether other nations could join was getting more difficult given how much work had already been done, he added.

“You start to look more at a tiering system or other mechanisms, where at the minimum people could have observer status, all the way to being a full-blown partner,” he said.

Japan’s defence ministry said the UK and Italy had emphasised the export potential of GCAP and that it was discussing a review of the country’s policy on exporting arms.

Sweden, which launched a joint study with the UK in 2019 to collaborate on a joint combat air development programme, is no longer involved, although Claesen said that did not mean the “door was firmly shut” to Saab, the country’s lead defence contractor.

GCAP is being developed at the same time as a rival Franco-German programme that has been plagued by political and industrial tensions between the partners. Claesen played down suggestions of either France or Germany joining, noting that “there was no talk about that”.

Berlin’s tough stance on military exports would also be a stumbling block, he added: “The position that the German government is currently taking [is] making it harder [for it] to be attractive to any partner.”