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The United Kingdom, Japan and Italy are on the verge of signing up an unprecedented agreement to begin the construction of a next-generation twin-engine stealth fighter jet with hypersonic weapons: The Tempest Project. As the last phase of negotiations reaches its conclusion, the consortium of Leonardo, British BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce will soon give birth to a completely unique multilateral project. By 2035 the Tempest will be designed and produced as a replacement to the ageing Typhoon model (Rabechault, 2022). At the 2022 Farnborough International Airshow, Herman Claesen, a BAE Systems senior manager specialised in the domain of combat air systems, stated that “it is a once-in-a-generation project” since the completion of the Eurofighter project (Rabechault, 2022).

By contrast, the recent Franco-German negotiations for the development of the long-awaited FCAS project have come to a standstill, while the Tempest Project has experienced considerable progress since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Even more particularly after Japan turned its back on its cooperation with US aerospace industries in favour of the Tempest program (Machi, 2022; McGraith, 2022). In this paper, I will then focus a particular attention on the core reasons leading these three countries to have come together in such a project of great dimension.

Japan

Japan's shift towards military cooperation with Europe has taken place in the context of Abe's abandonment of the Yoshida Doctrine in favour of a more proactive defence framework. The Yoshida Doctrine emerged in the post-war years of reconstruction and economic recovery as Japan was eager to move past its wartime legacy by embracing a pacifist posture under the patronage of the United States (Berkofsky, 2010). Yet, as the first cracks of the post-Cold War order began to appear, the Yoshida Doctrine became increasingly obsolete and, hence, unfit for the rising security challenges of the early twenty-first century (Hughes, 2015). Amidst simmering tensions with China following several clashes of fishing boats near the disputed Senkaku/ Diaoyu/Tiaoyutai Islands between 2010 and 2012 (McCurry, 2010; Liao, 2022), PM Shinzo Abe re-examined Japan's Yoshida doctrine by expanding the Japanese defence budget and proposing the revision of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (Santoso & Perwita, 2016; Liff & Maeda, 2018).

The establishment of a National Security Council in 2018 marked the entrance of Japan into an era of strong military build-up and strategic pragmatism in the face of Chinese expansionistic designs (Gallo, 2022). At the same time, military cooperation was no longer solely confined to the United States as Japan drew closer to EU member states through the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) that entered into force on 1 February 2019 (Tsuruoka, 2016; EEAS, 2019). Facing chronic gaps in terms of modernizing defence equipment and military capabilities for intensive war scenarios, Japan immediately viewed its rapprochement with Europe as a turning point in the evolution of its national military industry. Although several hurdles still remain which prevent Japan from becoming as a global arm exporter, several joint R&D and production agreements were successively concluded with the UK (2013), France (2015), Germany (2017) and Italy (2019) (Tsuruoka & Fiott, 2020).

Additionally, dialogue mechanisms between Japan's industrial defence partners and EU defence institutions (EDA, EEAS, EUMS, EUMC, and DG DEFIS) were dramatically improved under Articles 4, 7 and 17 of the SPA by providing an effective pathway for leading bilateral strategic discussions on defence capability and technological cooperation issues (EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement, 2019). Finally, the war in Ukraine has heightened fears of contagion in the Asia-Pacific Region, Japan's defence minister has urgently pushed for the completion of the negotiation process and the definition of the terms and conditions of the Tempest fighter jet programme before the end of the year (Andrada, 2022). Especially as many of the barriers to have already been lifted due to the previous Japanese defence minister removal of export barriers on high-tech components critical for the jet construction.

United Kingdom

Since the termination of its membership with the European Union in December 2021, the United Kingdom has been intensely looking for new military partners outside the EU and in the Asia-Pacific region. In March 2021, a new comprehensive vision for its Indo-Pacific policy strategy was thoroughly elaborated in a landmark document titled "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" (UK Government, 2021).

As the epicentre of the global geopolitical struggle drifts away from the Atlantic to the Pacific, post-Brexit UK has deemed it critical to deepen its existing military cooperation ties with its ASEAN partners and other Asian longstanding allies, including India and Japan (Edwards et al., 2022). Thus, a strategic alliance with Japan has become central to the new strategic roadmap of UK to preserve its regional security interests which are themselves closely aligned with the Japanese concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) (Woods, 2022). In the wake of the 2021 Carrier Strike Group (CSG) exercise held between the Royal Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force, both countries pushed for further negotiations on a Reciprocal Access Agreement to systematise future joint training exercises (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021).

This cooperation would build upon already existing commitment to strengthening defence and military technology and intelligence sharing through the Five Eyes (FVEY) initiative and the bilateral Defence Logistics Treaty in 2017 (The Japan Times, 2021). The then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson recalled that "the UK is working together with Japan as our closest security partner in Asia to promote global security, stability and prosperity. [...] this close collaboration between our forces will help support collective efforts to tackle international and regional challenges and threats" (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2017).

Additionally, both states have displayed interest in developing a partnership in the strategic area of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies since the signing of the UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) (TechUK, 2022). It is in this context of a flourishing relationship with the UK that Japan took full part in the development of the Future Combat Air System Technology Initiative (Barrie, 2022). This cooperation has pushed British engine maker Rolls Royce and the Japanese IHI Corporation to begin working on engine designs in anticipation of the Tempest project and Japan's F-X combat-aircraft programme (Barrie, 2022).

Despite promising moves from both sides, the main obstacle to the Tempest programme is the difficulty for both countries to exchange and process critical technological information due to different and often conflicting national classification criteria.

Italy

Since 2019, Italy has emerged as key project partner in the creation of the Tempest. In the latest Defence Multiannual Planning Document released in July 2022, Italy has planned to increase its Tempest's investments from 2.0 billion euros to 3.8 billion euros by 2036 (Italian Ministry of Defence, 2022). This is a massive investment which will not only give domestic weapon industries access to foreign expertise and technological know-how, but will also help Italian engineers enhance their skills in the field of digital innovations (Antinozzi & Taylor, 2022). The active participation of both Leonardo and Elettronica, two Italian companies specialised in defence and aerospace technologies, reflects the Italian government's ambition and expectations that this joint venture that could propel Italy to the forefront of defence technology (Antinozzi & Taylor, 2022).

Another compelling reason for Italy's engagement in the Tempest programme resides in its intention to play a more active and important role outside of the traditional Franco-German partnership that has dominated the FCAS project. It is unsurprising then that Italy clearly aspires to move away from its previous categorization as a mere supplier of F-35's electronic components to a more decisive and prominent position as a co-initiator and producer (Tosato, 2014). In parallel, Italy has never ceased advocating for developing equal partnership agreements with non-EU military powers, most particularly, post-Brexit UK which Italy views as its historical transatlantic ally (Antinozzi & Taylor, 2022). On the other hand, the active involvement of Japan has stirred up fears that Italy could be marginalized in the now trinational programme (Antinozzi & Taylor, 2022). Yet, despite the complexity and the delicate balance of shared responsibilities and tasks among the principal project partners, Italy is undoubtedly poised to become a major player in the defence technological industry from working side to side with the better experienced UK and Japan.

Conclusion

Evidently, Italy is set to gain valuable know-how in the defence industry from this partnership with the more experienced in military technology development, Japan and UK. Further, Japan and UK's relationship is equally set to grow in a positive direction that is based on previous projects, but will possibly be still plagued by the same issues linked to exchange of information. All of this of course is fuelled by the political changes in Japan, as well as the current security crisis in Europe, that have catalysed and highlighted the importance of these cooperating. After examining all the main aspects of the military and technological relations evolving between UK, Japan and Italy in the Tempest context, it is important to not lose sight of the project's ongoing rivalry with the troubled Franco-German FCAS programme (Machi, 2022), and whether Europe is capable of affording two competing fighter jet projects while the risk of a recession looms overhead (Mustoe, 2022).

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