

# Italy in Tempest: An Equal or Equitable Partner?

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**With Italy's new government, the country's commitment to the Tempest programme is likely to continue, not least because of the economic potential it holds for Italian industry. However, Italy's strategic geographical position on the Mediterranean and the limited popular support for defence spending means that little can be taken for granted. For the UK and the value of European defence links after Brexit, Italy's participation in Tempest has benefits beyond the project itself.**

In 2019, Italy announced its participation in the UK-led Future Combat Air Systems (FCAS)/Tempest programme with great fanfare. Three years later, the enthusiasm for Tempest is still high in Rome, as recently demonstrated by increased financial commitments to the programme. Indeed, the latest Defence Multiannual Planning Document, published in July 2022, **forecasts** an increase in spending on the early stages of the programme from €2.0 billion to €3.8 billion by 2036. While this development should certainly be welcomed, it is important not to take continued Italian enthusiasm for granted, especially in light of the fragile economic recovery underway, political volatility and a public that is significantly wary of defence spending. Finally, it is important for all parties to be realistic about the capabilities Italy can contribute to the programme.

## Italy's Ambitions

As Rome's latest Defence Planning Document **indicates**, the investment in Tempest is intended not only for the development of a weapons system: it represents an 'historic moment of international cooperation', allowing the national industry to access key technological know-how. Thus, building on its role in Tornado and Typhoon, the Italian government's public justification for Tempest rests on what it offers for employment,

STEM skills and technological advancement, especially in the field of digital engineering. Hence, there is a whole-of-government effort underway (involving the Ministries of Economy and Finance, Economic Development, Universities and Research, and Digital Innovation) to promote a 'generation of Tempest engineers', a similar approach to 'Team Tempest' in the UK. Notably, negotiations are already underway with the Ministry of Economic Development, a long-standing partner of Italian Defence in the promotion of national industry with higher technological content, to foster joint participation of national industry in the programme. So far, government-to-government and government-to-company synergies are alive and well. Speaking at Farnborough Airshow, Lt Col Davide Dentamaro of the Italian National Armaments Directorate's FCAS Programme Office **explained** that FCAS is very different to legacy efforts in European combat air, which often saw national industries battling one another into inefficiencies. This time, in contrast, 'there is complete synergy across industry and government partners', he said.

At the industry level, the emphasis in Italy is on Italian firms being more than mere suppliers of components, as has been the case with the F-35 fighter jet. The presence of Leonardo as a major element in both the UK and Italian industrial teams for Tempest should contribute to making Italy feel it has an equitable share of the development effort, especially as Leonardo **intensifies contacts** with Elettronica, another major defence electronics company in Italy. Italian industry now aspires to active participation in the research and development phases, aiming at transforming the expertise and skills of its workforce. This objective requires maintaining a central role in the joint venture, something that Italy has repeatedly emphasised. Indeed, as Air Force Chief of Staff Luca Goretti **has explained**, Rome joined the Tempest programme because it felt it could play a bigger role than it could obtain in the Franco-German-Spanish endeavour.

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Determined to move beyond a mere supplier role à la F-35, Italy is actively presenting itself as an 'equal' partner, expecting the sovereign and industrial benefits that a top-level partner receives. Yet, equal partner status requires significant funding levels and industrial capacity, both areas in which Italy might struggle.

## Italy's Realities

Defence occupies a strange position in Italian public opinion. The armed forces are largely respected and admired, but there is a public reluctance to spend money on them. This is reflected in somewhat timid defence spending. Despite the increase recorded in 2020, Italy's defence spending as a share of GDP remains low – below all other G7 countries, and below the average of the EU (1.6%) and NATO (1.8%). This prolonged underinvestment in defence means that industrial capacity remains Italy's main challenge. The Italian government has not invested in its industry, technology and skill base in the way the UK has done. As a result, it should not expect equal partner status without systematically addressing these deficiencies.

Italy's political volatility and the fact that investing in defence is not a vote-winner raises questions about the country's overall ability to meet Tempest partners' expectations and

needs. In July, the national unity government of Prime Minister Mario Draghi collapsed, and snap elections were held on 25 September 2022. The right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy and comprising Matteo Salvini's League and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia won nearly 44% of the vote. A governing right-wing coalition could impact Italian defence in a number of ways. Historically sympathetic to the Putin regime, these groupings might not necessarily feel the urgency of significantly ramping up defence spending, nor of developing sovereign warfighting capabilities. Furthermore, anti-immigrant Giorgia Meloni, set to become the country's prime minister, placed a particular emphasis on the need to restore the centrality of the Mediterranean in Italian and European policy in her **newly published party manifesto**. Migration management and securing the Mediterranean basin will be high on the new government's agenda, and it follows that continued commitment to ambitious defence projects in the air domain is not assured. It is true that, thus far, Italy has proven to be a committed and enthusiastic partner in the Tempest venture – but policy imperatives in the sea domain, coupled with the budgetary realities of a country that has experienced recurrent economic insecurity in recent years, mean that wariness must always be a factor for other partners.

## Keeping Italy On Board

An enthusiastic, like-minded partner – albeit with a capacity problem – is still valuable for the Tempest endeavour. In collaborative projects, partners ensure a series of benefits: economic gains through sharing development costs and through economies of scale in production and sharing in-service support and upgrade costs; enhanced interoperability; and strengthening bilateral relationships, including security relationships. In addition, Italy has so far demonstrated a **strong appetite** for exports, which is a positive development considering that members of joint defence initiatives can disagree on the application of export controls.

### **Rome has repeatedly expressed enthusiasm about the programme and has backed words with deeds by increasing financial commitments to Tempest**

On 3 January, Leonardo **concluded a deal** to take a 25.1% stake in the German electronics firm Hensoldt, which envisaged closer collaboration between the firms on e-scan radar technology being supplied to the Eurofighter. Encouragingly, the German government did not prevent this deal from going through. As Leonardo's Chief Strategic Equity Officer recently **told** Defence News: 'There may be a commonality in technology. The two aircraft must be interoperable to work together within NATO, so having Hensoldt work on FCAS and Leonardo work on Tempest could help'. Thus, besides contributing to the overall stability of the programme, keeping Italy on board would also increase interoperability with European partners, as well as enable industrial synergies with continental Europe. In a difficult post-Brexit world where relations with France have been having their ups and downs, there is value in a close London–Rome partnership. Thus far, Italy has been a strong advocate of the notion that alignment with the UK post-Brexit is fundamental to strengthening the transatlantic side of the strategic autonomy equation. As such, Italy has been among the greatest supporters of third-party involvement in EU-based collaborative defence programmes and initiatives. As European defence slowly awakens from its lethargy, it could be fruitful for the UK to nurture such relations in order to keep the door ajar for future cooperation.

## Looking Ahead

In the ongoing exploratory 'concept and assessment' phase of the Tempest programme, Italian involvement could be summarised as so far, so good. Rome has repeatedly expressed enthusiasm about the programme and has backed words with deeds by increasing financial commitments to Tempest. As it did with Tornado and then Typhoon, it looks set to provide continuing upfront money and will buy the eventual product. Considering the long timeframe for the project, however, it is sensible to expect oscillations in partners' levels of engagement, and Italy's strong commitment should be welcomed but not taken for granted.

As the country envisages a central role for itself in the Tempest endeavour, the growing prospect of Japan becoming a full-fledged partner in Tempest could potentially increase the chances of Italy feeling side-lined. However, Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini **recently visited** his counterpart in Japan where – in addition to global political issues – military cooperation, technological advancement and Tempest itself were prominent on the Italian delegation's agenda. The visit was a chance to give impetus to the Italian-Japanese technology and equipment implementation project, which kicked off in 2019 but was hindered by the coronavirus pandemic. Italy, therefore, does have its own Japanese contacts, and a potential Japanese involvement in Tempest should be seen as an opportunity to build on existing links and increase industrial synergies. It is important for Italy not to perceive the inclusion of a technologically advanced partner such as Japan in the Tempest endeavour as a zero-sum game. In fact, it is surely in Italy's interests to be a member of a partnership with strong foundations – financially and industrially – and to gain potential strategic benefits from closer defence and other relationships with Japan in the future.

As Tempest grows, both in complexity and perhaps in terms of the partnerships involved, Italy's realistic contribution to the programme is more likely to be equitable than equal, but should nonetheless be of great value for each of the participating governments and companies.

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