

Japan's Defence Industrial Strategy and Fighter Aircraft Production: The Drive for Tier-One Status

By CHRISTOPHER W. HUGHES

In the contemporary period, and as seen in its 2022 'National Security Documents', Japan has not abandoned its ambitions or traditional model to preserve an indigenous defence production capacity, even if accepting the need for significant modifications of its approach. This paper utilises Japan's case to address the related questions of how 'tier-two' states attempt to navigate—effectively or otherwise—approaches for developing an indigenous defence production base, including: exploitation of the interface of domestic civilian and military industrial sectors; selection of key technologies and sectors for prioritisation; and minimising over-dependence on, and linking with, foreign partners for the importation and development of weaponry. Although the paper considers Japan's defence production ambitions across a full range of weapons platforms and the extent of its model in meeting national strategic and industrial objectives, it places particular focus on examining Japanese interest in fighter plane production from the post-war to the contemporary era and the new Global Combat Air Programme for a sixth-generation fighter—involving Japan, the UK and Italy, and potentially other partners—as an attempt to break into the 'tier-one' of arms producers.