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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's Drone Doctrine — What the Bhairav Force Tells Us About the Future of Indian Warfare

INDIAN EXPRESS

7 January 2026

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SECURITY & DEFENCE

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GS3

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator •
linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

India's Drone Doctrine — What the Bhairav Force Tells Us About the Future of Indian Warfare

The Indian Express 7 January 2026 GS3

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India has raised a 1-lakh-strong drone force (Bhairav). Does India have the industrial base to sustain and replace these drones? What does the Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine experience teach India about drone warfare? How should India balance Make in India with operational urgency in drone procurement?"

WHY IN NEWS

The Indian Army formally unveiled the 'Bhairav' drone corps — 1 lakh operatives across 15 battalions — at Army Day 2026 in Jaipur. Combined with the Emergency Procurement of the Suryastra precision rocket (Rs 293 crore, Elbit Systems), this signals India's most explicit doctrinal statement on autonomous and standoff warfare. The question is whether India has the industrial and institutional architecture to make the doctrine stick.

THE LESSONS THAT CREATED BHAIRAV

Every major military build-up of recent decades has been prompted by someone else's war. India's Bhairav force is a product of watching four conflicts change military science within five years.

Azerbaijan–Armenia (Nagorno-Karabakh, September–November 2020): The most cited modern drone war. Azerbaijan deployed Turkish Bayraktar TB2 medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) drones and Israeli Harop loitering munitions against Armenian Buk-M2 and S-300 air defense systems, T-72 tanks, and artillery. In 44 days, drone strikes destroyed over 200 Armenian armored vehicles, 39 air defense systems, and dozens of artillery pieces — decisively tipping a 26-year-old frozen conflict. The lesson: even second-tier military forces can defeat sophisticated adversaries if they exploit drone asymmetry.

Russia–Ukraine (February 2022–present): Drone warfare has evolved faster in this conflict than in any previous war. Key developments: commercial FPV (First-Person View) drones modified for kamikaze strikes replaced expensive precision munitions at the squad level; both sides have developed AI-assisted targeting; electronic warfare (jamming and spoofing) has become as decisive as the drones themselves; Ukraine now manufactures over 1 million drones annually — a scale of production that transforms drones from tactical tools into a strategic industry.

The Indian implication is dual:

Offensive: India's adversaries — both China and Pakistan — have invested heavily in drone capabilities. The PLA operates WZ-7 high-altitude reconnaissance drones over Ladakh and has integrated drones into its Joint Operations doctrine since 2016. Pakistan's procurement of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UAS is specifically designed for the Kashmir/Punjab front. India cannot be a drone-disadvantaged power against either adversary.

Defensive: Drone infiltration across the LoC — primarily commercial quadcopters carrying drugs and weapons for terrorist modules — has averaged 400+ annually. The economic asymmetry (Rs 50,000 commercial drone vs Rs 1+ crore interceptor missile) means India needs systematic soft-kill (jamming, spoofing) C-UAS, not just hard-kill.

WHAT 1 LAKH OPERATIVES ACTUALLY MEANS

The Bhairav force's scale — 1,00,000 operatives — requires context. This is not 1 lakh drone pilots in the fighter-pilot sense. The 1 lakh figure includes:

Drone pilots (ISR operators): Trained to fly surveillance and target designation drones, reading sensor feeds, and identifying targets in real time

Attack drone operators: Trained for FPV-style precision attack drones and loitering munitions employment

Maintenance technicians: Trained to repair, calibrate, and maintain drone systems in field conditions — the support tail that determines operational availability

Electronic warfare operators: Trained in the RF environment management that enables drones to function (or disables enemy drones through jamming)

Logistics and support: Trained in battery management, spare parts inventory, secure communications

The 15 battalions are likely organised regionally — with concentrations along the Northern Command (China front), Western Command (Pakistan front), and remaining forces in other commands. The planned expansion to 40 battalions would likely add capacity in maritime/coastal roles (Southern Command/Andaman).

THE INDUSTRIAL GAP — INDIA'S REAL DRONE CHALLENGE

The Bhairav force's military rationale is impeccable. Its sustainability depends on a question the announcement does not answer: **where do the drones come from?**

India currently imports approximately 80% of its military-grade drones, primarily from Israel (Heron, Searcher, Harop) and the United States (previously Ukraine-era systems). Domestic manufacturers — ideaForge, Garuda Aerospace, Alpha Design Technologies, Tata Advanced Systems — are growing but cannot yet supply the volumes and performance specifications a 40-battalion drone force requires.

The PLI scheme for drones (Rs 120 crore, 2021) is undersized relative to the ambition. Compare: China's drone industry receives hundreds of billions of yuan in state support annually. DJI alone — one Chinese company — dominates global commercial drone production with ~70% market share. India's entire drone PLI outlay is smaller than what a single DJI product line earns in revenue.

The Emergency Procurement of Suryastra from Israel's Elbit illustrates the dilemma: operational urgency demands the best available technology immediately, but importing rather than producing drones domestically means India builds strategic dependency rather than strategic capability. Every drone that crashes or is intercepted must be replaced — and if replacements must be imported, operational continuity is vulnerable to supplier relationships.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Bhairav force (1 lakh; 15 battalions; Army Day Jaipur Jan 15 2026); Suryastra (Rs 293 crore; NIBE Ltd; Elbit Systems; 150-300 km; CEP <5m); Bayraktar TB2 (Turkey; MALE drone; Azerbaijan-Armenia war); Harop (Israeli loitering munition); FPV drone; C-UAS (Counter-UAS); PLI Drones (Rs 120 crore; 2021); ideaForge (India's largest drone maker; SWITCH; Indra); Emergency Procurement (DAP 2020); iDEX.

Mains GS-3: India's drone warfare doctrine — strategic rationale and industrial gap | Emergency Procurement vs indigenisation — the operational urgency dilemma | Lessons of Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine for India's defence planning | India's drone ecosystem — PLI effectiveness, domestic capacity, import dependency | C-UAS challenge on the LoC — economic asymmetry and systemic response.

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

BHAIRAV DRONE CORPS:

Strength: 1,00,000+ operatives; 15 battalions raised; 25 more planned (40 total)

First display: Army Day Parade, Jaipur, January 15, 2026

Named after: Bhairav (fierce aspect of Lord Shiva)

Integration with: “Year of Networking and Data Centricity” 2026

SURYASTRA:

Contract value: Rs 293 crore; Emergency Procurement (DAP 2020)

Indian contractor: NIBE Limited

Technology: Elbit Systems, Israel

Range: 150–300 km; CEP <5m

DRONE WARS — KEY REFERENCES:

Nagorno-Karabakh 2020: Bayraktar TB2 + Harop destroyed 200+ Armenian armored vehicles in 44 days

Ukraine 2022+: FPV drone revolution; Ukraine produces 1 million+ drones per year

China PLA: WZ-7 high-altitude recon; drone integration in Joint Operations Doctrine 2016

Pakistan: Bayraktar TB2, Wing Loong (Chinese); LoC drone infiltration 400+ per year

INDIA’S DRONE ECOSYSTEM:

Import share (military): ~80% from Israel and USA

PLI Drones: Rs 120 crore; 2021; 14 companies benefiting

ideaForge: SWITCH (military ISR), Indra (border surveillance); NSE-listed

D-4 (Detect-Deter-Destroy): DRDO C-UAS system; radar + RF jamming + hard kill

GLOBAL DRONE LEADERS:

DJI (China): ~70% global commercial drone market

Baykar (Turkey): Bayraktar TB2; exported to 35+ countries

General Atomics (USA): Predator, Reaper (MALE/HALE)

Israel Aerospace Industries: Heron, Harop, Harpy

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Loitering munition: One-way attack drone (kamikaze); loiters over area then dives on target; examples: Israeli Harop, Indian ALFA-S (DRDO)

MALE drone: Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance; 2,000-15,000 ft; endurance 24+ hours; reconnaissance + strike

HALE drone: High-Altitude Long-Endurance; 40,000+ ft; strategic ISR; examples: Predator B, WZ-7

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of Defence, PIB, AffairsCloud

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