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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India-France Defence Partnership — Balancing Indigenisation with Strategic Import

THE HINDU

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SUBJECTS COVERED**SECURITY & DEFENCE** **IR****GS PAPERS****GS2** **GS3****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS2

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Does purchasing Rafale-Marine jets contradict India's Aatmanirbhar Bharat goals? How should India balance immediate operational needs with long-term defence indigenisation?"

WHY IN NEWS

President Macron's India visit (February 2026) upgraded the bilateral relationship to "Special Global Strategic Partnership," with the finalisation of 26 Rafale-Marine jets for the Navy — reigniting debate on whether India's strategic imports undermine its Aatmanirbhar Bharat in defence ambitions.

THE INDIGENISATION IMPERATIVE

India spent **₹6.21 lakh crore on defence** in 2025-26. Historically, **65–70% of this went to imports** — primarily Russia (aircraft, submarines, tanks), Israel (drones, missiles, sensors), and France (Rafale). The defence budget has expanded, but **domestic manufacturing has lagged**, leaving India as one of the world's top 3 arms importers.

The government has responded with structural reforms:

Negative Import Lists (iDEX categories closed to imports): 4 lists totalling 310+ items as of 2026

Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020: Prioritises "Buy Indian - IDDM" (Indigenously Designed, Developed, Manufactured) categories

Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020: Target: ₹1.75 lakh crore in defence production + ₹35,000 crore in exports by 2024-25

iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence): Funds start-ups and MSMEs

Despite these, India's defence exports were **₹21,083 crore in FY 2023-24** — growing rapidly (from ₹686 crore in 2013-14), but still far from the ₹35,000 crore target.

THE RAFALE-MARINE DILEMMA

The 26 Rafale-Marine jets for INS Vikrant represent the same strategic tension as the original 36 Air Force Rafales (2016 deal).

The case for the import:

The **MiG-29K** (Russia), the current carrier-based aircraft, has been plagued by poor serviceability, engine failures, and accidents — Indian Navy reportedly grounded significant portions of the fleet

TEJAS Mk1A Naval variant is still under development; its STOBAR (Short Take-Off But Arrested Recovery) compatibility is unproven at scale

INS Vikrant became operational in 2022 — it needs an immediate, mission-ready fighter squadron

Operational timelines for indigenously developed aircraft (HAL's LCA Navy Mk.2) extend to 2030 at the earliest

The case against the import:

Rafale-Marine will deepen India's **technology dependency** on France for spare parts, software updates, and weapons integration

Money spent on imports crowds out **investment in indigenous R&D** (DRDO, HAL)

France's **IP restrictions** (as seen in the Air Force Rafales) limit India's ability to modify systems or transfer technology to third countries

The deal follows the same **G-to-G (government-to-government) fast-track** route that bypasses competitive procurement — reducing bargaining power

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER: THE CORE ISSUE

Every major arms deal India signs carries a **transfer of technology (ToT)** negotiation. The outcomes have been mixed:

Platform	Supplier	ToT Outcome
Su-30MKI	Russia	HAL license-builds; ~80% components from India
T-90 Tanks	Russia	License production; reasonable ToT
Rafale Air Force	France	Minimal ToT; no export permission
P-75 Scorpene submarines	France (DCNS)	Some transfer; Indian assembly at MDL
AH-64E Apache	USA	Minimal manufacturing; service rights only

The Rafale-Marine deal will need to include **stronger ToT provisions** — ideally for the naval AESA radar (RBE2), SPECTRA electronic warfare suite, and meteor missile integration — if it is to advance Aatmanirbhar Bharat goals.

H-125 MODEL: THE RIGHT BLUEPRINT?

The **Airbus-Tata H-125 helicopter assembly line** in Karnataka represents a potentially better model:

Private-sector manufacturing (not public sector monopoly)

Joint venture structure with gradual localisation targets

Dual use (civil + military) — builds commercial viability for the manufacturer

Aligned with **DPIIT** (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade) single-window clearances

This model — where a foreign OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) enters a **co-production agreement** in India — mirrors the successful Tata-Airbus C295 transport aircraft project at Vadodara (India's first private sector military aircraft facility).

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY VS. ALLIANCE DEEPENING

India's **strategic autonomy doctrine** — maintaining independence from bloc politics — is tested every time a major G-to-G arms deal is signed. The Rafale deals (both Air Force and Navy) come with:

Maintenance and logistics dependencies (MRO — Maintenance, Repair, Overhaul — contracts)

Interoperability pressure to join Western military communication networks

CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) risk if India simultaneously buys Russian S-400 systems (the US granted a CAATSA waiver for S-400 — but it is not guaranteed to extend)

France, however, is different from the US in one critical way: France **supports India's strategic autonomy** (including on Russia policy) and does not condition arms sales on geopolitical alignment. This makes the India-France partnership uniquely sustainable.

THE PATH FORWARD

India's defence indigenisation can only succeed with:

Sustained R&D investment: DRDO budget needs to rise from ~2% of defence budget to 5%+

Private sector participation: DPP/DAP reforms enabling Tata, L&T, Bharat Forge, Mahindra to compete with DRDO/HAL

ToT-or-nothing procurement policy: No major platform import without binding ToT for critical sub-systems

Export strategy: Making TEJAS Mk1A, Dhruv helicopter, Prahar missile, and Akash SHORAD competitive in the global market

Maintenance ecosystems: Building HAL's MRO capacity so Indian platforms achieve higher serviceability rates than the MiG-29K

The Rafale-Marine deal, if structured well with ToT and local content obligations, can **advance both operational readiness and indigenisation**. If structured poorly — as purely a platform import — it will only deepen dependency.

UPSC RELEVANCE

DAP 2020, iDEX, DPEPP 2020, Negative Import Lists, MRO, CAATSA, Rafale-Marine, INS Vikrant. Mains GS-2: India-France strategic partnership; India's UNSC bid; strategic autonomy doctrine; foreign policy balancing. GS-3: Aatmanirbhar Bharat in defence; defence indigenisation; defence exports; private sector in defence manufacturing; HAL vs. private sector debate.

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INDIA DEFENCE INDIGENISATION FRAMEWORK:

Negative Import Lists: **310+ items** (4 lists; 2020–2024)

DAP 2020: Highest priority to **Buy Indian – IDDM** (Indigenously Designed, Developed, Manufactured)

DPEPP 2020: ₹1.75 lakh crore production target + ₹35,000 crore exports by 2024-25

Actual exports FY2024: **₹21,083 crore** (up from ₹686 crore in FY2014)

iDEX: 350+ challenges; 400+ startups; ₹1,500+ crore investments

INDIA'S DEFENCE BUDGET (2025-26):

Total: **₹6.21 lakh crore**

Import share (historically): **65–70%**

Capital procurement: ₹1.8 lakh crore+ (equipment, ships, aircraft)

KEY DEFENCE MANUFACTURING INITIATIVES:

C295 transport aircraft: Tata Advanced Systems + Airbus; Vadodara (first private military aircraft MRO facility)

AK-203 rifles: Indo-Russian joint venture; Amethi (UP); 600,000 rifles

Tejas Mk1A: HAL; 83 ordered by IAF; delivery from 2024 onwards

CAATSA: COUNTERING AMERICA'S ADVERSARIES THROUGH SANCTIONS ACT (2017); TARGETS IRAN, RUSSIA, NORTH KOREA; INDIA'S S-400 DEAL RECEIVED WAIVER FROM USA

Sources: The Hindu, PIB, Indian Express

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