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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

National Security Cannot Be Outsourced — India's Defence Indigenisation Paradox

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SECURITY & DEFENCE | ECONOMY

GS PAPERS

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National Security Cannot Be Outsourced — India's Defence Indigenisation Paradox

The Hindu 10 March 2026 GS2 GS3

TH The Hindu | MAINS RELEVANCE: GS Paper 2 GS Paper 3

INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India is simultaneously the world's largest arms importer and pursuing Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence — how do you resolve this apparent contradiction, and what structural reforms to DRDO and DPSUs would accelerate indigenous defence production?"

WHY IN NEWS

The Hindu editorial of March 10, 2026 examines India's defence procurement trajectory as the Ministry of Defence announces a new positive indigenisation list — the fifth such list banning imports of specified weapon systems — while SIPRI's latest arms transfer data continues to show India among the world's top arms importers.

THE EDITORIAL'S ARGUMENT

The Hindu makes a strategic-economic argument:

1. Import dependence in defence is not merely an economic inefficiency — it is a strategic vulnerability. When India's primary fighter aircraft (Su-30 MKI), main battle tank (T-90), and submarines (Scorpène — French design, Russian torpedoes) depend on foreign components, a sanctions episode or supply disruption can directly degrade combat readiness. This is not a theoretical risk: Russia's war-induced supply chain disruption for spare parts has already impacted Indian Air Force operational rates.

2. The Positive Indigenisation Lists are the right mechanism but insufficient without R&D investment. Banning imports creates demand for domestic alternatives — but if DRDO cannot deliver within a reasonable timeline and private sector is not given meaningful technology access, the ban simply creates a capability gap rather than indigenous capacity.

3. The structural problem is risk-aversion, not capability. Indian private sector firms (Tata, L&T, Mahindra) have demonstrated manufacturing competence. The bottleneck is the reluctance of the military services to accept Indian-made equipment for combat roles, preference for foreign specifications, and DRDO's tendency toward long development timelines over iterative capability delivery.

INDIA'S DEFENCE IMPORT PROFILE

SIPRI Data — Arms Imports

India has been among the world's **top 3 arms importers** for most of the past decade:

Period	India's Share of Global Arms Imports
2009–2013	~14% (ranked 1st)
2014–2018	~12% (ranked 1st)
2019–2023	~9.8% (ranked 1st–3rd)

Major suppliers (2019–2023): Russia (~34%), France (~26%), USA (~13%), Israel (~9%)

Note: Russia's share has been declining as supply chains have been disrupted post-2022.

Key Imported Platforms

Platform	Type	Supplier
Su-30 MKI	Air superiority fighter	Russia (licensed production by HAL)
T-90 Bhishma	Main Battle Tank	Russia (licensed production)
Scorpène submarine	Conventional submarine	France (MDL, Mumbai)
Rafale	MRCA fighter	France (36 + additional on order)
C-17 Globemaster	Strategic transport	USA
Apache AH-64E	Attack helicopter	USA
S-400 Triumf	Air defence	Russia

ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT IN DEFENCE

Policy Framework

Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020 — the procurement bible. Categories in order of preference:

- **Buy (Indian-IDDM):** Indigenously Designed, Developed and Manufactured — highest priority
- **Buy (Indian):** >50% indigenous content
- **Buy and Make (Indian):** Foreign design, Indian production
- **Make:** Development by Indian industry
- **Buy (Global with ToT):** Import with Technology Transfer
- **Buy (Global):** Straightforward import — lowest preference

Positive Indigenisation Lists

MoD has issued **5 Positive Indigenisation Lists (PIL)** banning import of items progressively:

- PIL I (2020): 101 items (ammunition, sonar, transport aircraft)
- PIL II (2021): 108 additional items
- PIL III–V: 300+ additional items including complex systems
- **Total items on ban list as of 2026: 500+**

Targets

- **70%** of defence capital budget for domestic procurement by **2027**
- Defence exports target: **₹35,000 crore (~$5 billion) by 2025** — ~₹21,000 crore achieved in 2023-24 (record)

DRDO AND DPSUS — THE EXECUTION GAP

DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation)

- Under **Ministry of Defence**; **~50 laboratories**; employs ~30,000 scientists
- Criticisms: Long development timelines (Arjun MBT took 40+ years from concept to induction); cost overruns; specification creep
- Successes: Akash surface-to-air missile system (inducted, exported); Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher; Astra air-to-air missile; Kaveri engine (developmental stage)
- Challenge: Aero-engine gap — LCA Tejas Mk1A still uses **GE F404 engine** (American); Kaveri engine not yet combat-ready

DPSUs (Defence Public Sector Undertakings)

Seven major DPSUs after corporatisation of Ordnance Factory Board (2021):

- **HAL** (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) — aircraft, helicopters
- **BEL** (Bharat Electronics Limited) — defence electronics
- **BEML** — heavy vehicles
- **MDL** (Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders) — submarines, warships
- **Cochin Shipyard, GRSE, Garden Reach** — naval vessels

iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence)

- Defence startup ecosystem under MoD
- Over 350 defence startups engaged since 2018
- Aims to bring private innovation into defence R&D

UPSC RELEVANCE

SIPRI arms import rankings; DAP 2020 categories; Positive Indigenisation Lists; DRDO, HAL, BEL, MDL; iDEX; S-400 CAATSA; Rafale; LCA Tejas Mk1A; Defence Exports target ₹35,000 crore.

MAINS GS-2:

National security — strategic autonomy vs. alliance dependence; India-Russia-USA triangulation.

MAINS GS-3:

Defence manufacturing — Atmanirbhar Bharat; DRDO reform; private sector in defence.

ESSAY:

"A nation that cannot arm itself from its own resources cannot claim to be truly sovereign."

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIA'S ARMS IMPORT POSITION:

SIPRI 2019–23: India = **~9.8%** of global arms imports; among top 3 globally

Major suppliers: Russia (~34%), France (~26%), USA (~13%), Israel (~9%)

Russia supply disruption risk: Post-2022 sanctions impacting spare parts availability

DEFENCE ACQUISITION PROCEDURE (DAP) 2020:

Replaced: Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2016

Priority order: Buy Indian-IDDM → Buy Indian → Buy & Make Indian → Make → Buy Global with ToT → Buy Global

IDDM: **Indigenously Designed, Developed and Manufactured** (highest preference category)

POSITIVE INDIGENISATION LISTS:

PIL I (2020): **101 items** banned from import

PIL II (2021): **108 more items**

Total items on ban list (2026): **500+**

Includes: Ammunition, sonar systems, helicopters, transport aircraft, artillery guns

ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT TARGETS:

70% of defence capital budget for domestic procurement by 2027

Defence exports: **₹35,000 crore ($~5B) target**; achieved **~₹21,000 crore in 2023-24** (record)

KEY ORGANISATIONS:

DRDO: ~50 labs; ~30,000 scientists; under MoD

DPSUs: HAL, BEL, BEML, MDL, Cochin Shipyard, GRSE, Garden Reach

OFB (Ordnance Factory Board): Corporatised into 7 DPSUs in **2021**

iDEX: Defence innovation ecosystem; 350+ startups engaged

KEY PROGRAMMES:

LCA Tejas Mk1A: Indigenous light combat aircraft; engine = **GE F404** (US); Kaveri engine under development

Arjun MBT: Indigenous main battle tank; **40+ years** development; limited induction

Akash SAM: Indigenous surface-to-air missile; inducted + exported

S-400 Triumf: Russian air defence system; CAATSA risk (US sanctions threat)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act): US law; sanctions countries buying Russian defence equipment; India received waiver

QUAD technology cooperation: US-India major defence partner since 2016; INDUS-X defence tech initiative

Make in India in Defence: FDI limit raised to **74% automatic route** (previously 49%); 100% via government approval

Defence corridor: UP Defence Industrial Corridor + Tamil Nadu Defence Industrial Corridor — designated manufacturing zones

Source: The Hindu, Vajiram & Ravi

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