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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Eyes in the Sky — India's SBS-3 Satellite Programme and the Militarisation of Its Space Sector

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

India's decision to fast-track its **Space-Based Surveillance Phase 3 (SBS-3)** programme — 52 military satellites, $3 billion, 12-18 month compressed development cycles, three private companies — is a direct consequence of Operation Sindoor. The May 2025 strikes on terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan exposed what defence analysts had long cautioned: India's real-time satellite coverage of Pakistan's interior was partly dependent on allied intelligence and commercial imagery. That dependence is now being eliminated. The SBS-3 programme, if executed as planned, will give India a persistent, all-weather surveillance capability over both its western and northern borders that it has never previously possessed.

The programme is necessary. The questions about how it is being executed deserve examination.

THE INTELLIGENCE GAP OPERATION SINDOOR REVEALED

Operation Sindoor struck nine targets across Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The targeting was described by India as intelligence-driven precision — each camp was identified, monitored, and struck with guided munitions. But how much of that intelligence came from India's own satellites, and how much from allied sources, is not fully public.

What is clear from the post-operation debates is that India's existing satellite constellation — RISAT-2B (SAR), Cartosat-3, EMISAT — provided useful but incomplete coverage. The RISAT SAR satellites have limited orbital coverage; Cartosat provides high-resolution imagery but is weather-dependent. A constellation of 52 satellites — including SAR, EO, and SIGINT — with a revisit time of under 30 minutes for any point on India's borders would eliminate these gaps.

The strategic logic is sound. India cannot afford to depend on the US, France, or Israel for time-sensitive intelligence about Pakistani military positions during a conflict. A credible deterrent posture requires credible autonomous intelligence.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR QUESTION

The SBS-3 decision to involve three private companies — Ananth Technologies, Centum Electronics, Alpha Design Technologies — reflects India's post-2020 space liberalisation. The Space Activities Act framework opened space to private players; IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre) was created to regulate them. Satellites like Pixxel's Earth observation platforms and Dhruva Space's smallsats have demonstrated that Indian private companies can deliver in space.

But military surveillance satellites are a different proposition from commercial Earth observation. They carry higher classification requirements, more stringent electromagnetic shielding, precision pointing mechanisms, and anti-tamper features. The 12-18 month compressed timelines are aggressive even for ISRO with its established supply chains. For private companies still building their space manufacturing infrastructure, they are ambitious.

The risk is not failure — it is partial success. A satellite that functions for 18 months instead of a planned 5-year lifespan is worse than no satellite, because it creates false confidence in coverage that does not actually exist when needed.

THE PROLIFERATION QUESTION

India's expansion of its military satellite constellation will inevitably be monitored by China and Pakistan. China's own military satellite constellation (over 260 satellites as of 2026) already provides persistent coverage of India's borders. Pakistan, as a near-peer in regional terms, will respond to SBS-3 by strengthening its electronic countermeasures, camouflage protocols, and satellite awareness programmes.

This is the action-reaction dynamic of space militarisation. India must build SBS-3 — the alternative is strategic blindness. But building it without a parallel effort on space norms, space debris management, and preventing the outer space conflict from escalating requires more diplomatic attention than is currently visible.

India is a signatory to the Outer Space Treaty (1967) but has no binding commitment on military satellites. The UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) has been unable to develop consensus norms on military space activity. India should use its current Security Council engagement (as an elected member) to advocate for minimal norms on military satellite transparency that reduce the risk of misperception.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

SBS-3 is part of a broader Indian space-defence build-up that includes the Defence Space Agency (DSA, established 2019), the Defence Space Research Organisation (DSRO), and the SBS-1 and SBS-2 predecessors. The architecture is being built for a 2030s threat environment where India faces simultaneous space-enabled military pressure from China in the north and Pakistan in the west.

In that context, 52 surveillance satellites in five years is not ambitious — it is barely adequate. The question is whether India can build the institutional ecosystem — procurement, testing, launch cadence, operational integration — to make the satellite data operationally useful, not just technically present.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Science & Tech	SAR satellites; space surveillance; military space technology; private space sector
GS3 — Security	Operation Sindoor; space-based intelligence; ASAT capabilities; Outer Space Treaty
GS2 — IR	India-China space rivalry; space norms; COPUOS; non-proliferation

Mains Keywords: SBS-3, space-based surveillance, Operation Sindoor, military satellites, SAR, private space sector, IN-SPACe, Space Activities Act, Outer Space Treaty, COPUOS, space militarisation

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
SBS-3 cost	~$3 billion
SBS-3 satellites	52 by 2029
Private companies	Ananth Technologies, Centum Electronics, Alpha Design Technologies
Development timeline	12–18 months (compressed from 4 years)
India's space regulator	IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre)
Defence Space Agency	Established 2019
Outer Space Treaty	1967 — India signatory; no binding rules on military satellites
COPUOS	UN Committee on Peaceful Uses of Outer Space
India's existing SAR satellite	RISAT series (ISRO)
Operation Sindoor	May 7-10, 2025

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