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India Fast-Tracks SBS-3 Spy Satellite Programme — 52 Military Satellites by 2029 Post-Operation Sindoor

28 April 2026

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28 April 2026 · 3 min read

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WHY IN NEWS

Following **Operation Sindoore** (May 2025) — India's precision strike on 9 terrorist camps in Pakistan — the Government of India has dramatically accelerated its **Space-Based Surveillance Phase 3 (SBS-3) programme**. The **\$3 billion** programme aims to deploy **52 military surveillance satellites** by **2029**, providing continuous, all-weather intelligence on India's borders with Pakistan and China. Crucially, three **private Indian defence companies** — Ananth Technologies, Centum Electronics, and Alpha Design Technologies — have been roped in, with satellite development timelines compressed from the typical 4 years to just **12–18 months** per satellite.

OPERATION SINDOOR — THE STRATEGIC DRIVER

Operation Sindoore exposed a specific intelligence gap. India's real-time satellite surveillance of Pakistan's interior — particularly the camps struck at Bahawalpur, Muridke, and Sialkot — relied partly on intelligence from allied satellites and commercial imagery providers. A dedicated Indian all-weather, all-time surveillance constellation would eliminate this dependence in future operations.

The lesson is operational: persistent overhead surveillance of adversary territory is not a luxury but an operational necessity for any military action based on intelligence-driven precision targeting.

SBS-3 PROGRAMME — ARCHITECTURE

FEATURE	DETAIL
Programme name	Space-Based Surveillance Phase 3 (SBS-3)
Cost	~\$3 billion (~₹25,000 crore)
Target deployment	52 satellites by 2029
Satellite types	Electro-Optical (EO), Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR — all-weather), SIGINT (signals intelligence)
Orbit	Low Earth Orbit (LEO) and Medium Earth Orbit (MEO)
Revisit time target	<30 minutes for any point on India's border regions
Development timeline	Compressed to 12–18 months per satellite (from 4 years)
Private companies	Ananth Technologies, Centum Electronics, Alpha Design Technologies

WHY SAR SATELLITES MATTER

Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) satellites can image the ground in all weather conditions — through clouds, rain, and at night. This distinguishes them from optical (EO) satellites, which are blind under cloud cover. India's border with Pakistan and China experiences significant cloud cover, particularly during monsoon. A SAR-dominant surveillance constellation provides:

- Continuous monitoring regardless of weather
- Detection of military vehicle movements at night
- Monitoring of construction activity in disputed border areas (e.g., Chinese infrastructure in Depsang, Aksai Chin)

PRIVATE SECTOR IN DEFENCE SPACE — A POLICY SHIFT

The inclusion of private companies in SBS-3 is itself significant. Until the **Space Activities Act** framework and the liberalisation of India's space sector (2020 onwards), ISRO and DRDO dominated Indian space programmes. The SBS-3 private company model — compressing timelines by leveraging commercial manufacturing practices — mirrors the US Department of Defense's SpaceWORKS approach and the UK's One Web-style disaggregated constellation model.

COMPANY	EXPERTISE
Ananth Technologies	Satellite systems integration; ISRO sub-systems supplier
Centum Electronics	Defence electronics; satellite subsystems; avionics
Alpha Design Technologies	Electronic warfare systems; defence communications

INDIA'S SPACE SURVEILLANCE ECOSYSTEM

PROGRAMME	PURPOSE
EMISAT	SIGINT satellite (signals intelligence); launched 2019
Cartosat series	Reconnaissance and mapping; up to 0.25m resolution
RISAT series	SAR-based all-weather surveillance
GISAT	Geo-stationary imaging satellite
SBS-3 (new)	Comprehensive LEO/MEO surveillance constellation

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Science & Tech	Military satellites; SAR technology; India's space programme
GS3 — Security	Operation Sindoor; space-based intelligence; surveillance technology
GS2 — Governance	Space policy; Space Activities Act; private sector in defence space

Mains Keywords: SBS-3, Space-Based Surveillance, Operation Sindoor, SAR satellite, surveillance constellation, private defence space, Ananth Technologies, Centum Electronics, Alpha Design Technologies, ISRO, space policy reform

Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Programme	Space-Based Surveillance Phase 3 (SBS-3)
Cost	~\$3 billion (≈₹25,000 crore)
Satellites	52 by 2029
Development timeline	12–18 months (compressed from 4 years)
Private companies	Ananth Technologies, Centum Electronics, Alpha Design Technologies
Trigger	Operation Sindoor (May 2025) — intelligence gap exposed
SAR advantage	All-weather, day-night surveillance
Current SAR satellite	RISAT series (ISRO)
Space policy	Space Activities Act framework; sector liberalised 2020
Revisit target	<30 minutes for border areas

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