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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

From Purchase to Partnership: On India's Drone Strategy

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From Purchase to Partnership: On India's Drone Strategy

 **The Hindu** 20 June 2026 **GS3**

Source: ujyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Why might buying a fixed number of drones in a single deal leave the armed forces worse off than a partnership that promises continuous upgrades?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [The Hindu](#)

 **Every fact web-verified against primary sources** (<https://ujyari.com/how-we-verify/>)

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Drones have reshaped the battlefield, turning cheap, software-defined platforms into instruments that can blunt (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/blunt/>) expensive conventional forces. India's defence establishment is acquiring drones at scale, but the way it acquires them, through one-off competitive purchases of fixed quantities, sits uneasily with a technology that improves and obsolesces in months. The question of the hour is whether India can shift from buying drones to partnering for an evolving drone capability.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

A drone bought today is outdated tomorrow. Tactical drone systems demand continuous iteration against fast-changing threats, which a single fixed purchase cannot deliver. India should move to long-term managed-service partnerships with manufacturers, framing indigenous drone capability as an innovation-ecosystem problem rather than a procurement transaction, and aligning its acquisition rules with the iterative tempo of modern drone warfare.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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| ELEMENT | WHAT IT IS | WHY IT MATTERS |
|--|--|---|
| Transactional procurement | One-off purchase of fixed units | Locks in capability that quickly obsolesces |
| Managed-service partnership | Long-term contract for evolving capability | Guarantees upgrades and lifecycle support |
| Software-defined drones | Capability driven by code and sensors | Iteration matters more than initial hardware |
| iDEX (https://ujivari.com/terms/idex-defence-innovation/) and drone PLI | Innovation and manufacturing support | Existing scaffolding for an ecosystem model |
| Counter-drone adaptation | Rapid response to enemy drones | Cannot wait for multi-year procurement cycles |

THE ANALYSIS: BUYING A CAPABILITY, NOT A BOX

- 1 Drones are software, not just airframes.** Their decisive features, autonomy, swarming, electronic-warfare resistance, are updated continuously. A purchase fixes the airframe and the code at contract date, both of which age fast.
- 2 Procurement cycles are too slow for the threat.** By the time a multi-year tender concludes, the adversary has fielded new counters. Recent operations showed that the ability to adapt drones in the field mattered more than the size of the original order.
- 3 Partnership funds an ecosystem.** A managed-service model pays domestic firms to keep capability current, sustaining engineers, start-ups, and supply chains rather than financing a single delivery and then walking away.
- 4 The institutional scaffolding exists.** The Drone Rules of 2021 liberalised the regulatory regime, the production-linked incentive scheme seeds manufacturing, and iDEX funds defence innovators. What is missing is acquisition rules that reward iteration over lowest one-time cost.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

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Liberalised civilian drone regulation, easing manufacturing and operations.

Production-linked incentive scheme to build domestic drone and component manufacturing.

Innovations for Defence Excellence, the Defence Ministry platform funding start-ups and MSMEs for military innovation.

Recent operations highlighted counter-drone agility and indigenous adaptation over fixed-quantity imports.

THE DEBATE

The argument for partnerships is that only continuous engagement with manufacturers keeps drone fleets current, sustains domestic talent, and converts a purchasing line item into a living capability.

The argument against is that long-term contracts can create vendor lock-in, escalate lifecycle costs, and dilute accountability if a few firms capture the relationship without delivering promised upgrades.

The balanced verdict: the partnership model is the right direction, but it must be built with open standards, milestone-based payments, and multiple competing partners to avoid the very lock-in critics fear.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

Distinguish between acquiring a product and acquiring a capability. A product is a static thing you own; a capability is a dynamic outcome you must sustain. For fast-evolving technologies, procurement designed around products guarantees obsolescence, while procurement designed around capabilities builds resilience (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/resilience/>). This lens applies to cyber-defence, surveillance, and space assets as much as to drones.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Threat evolves -> Fixed purchase freezes capability -> Gap widens -> Partnership model -> Continuous upgrades -> Capability stays current

THE WAY FORWARD

- ① **Recast acquisition rules** to allow managed-service and outcome-based contracts for drone systems, not just lowest-cost one-time buys.
- ② **Use iDEX and the drone PLI** to anchor an ecosystem of competing domestic partners.

- 3 **Mandate** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/mandate/>) **open architectures and data standards** so the state is not captured by a single vendor.
- 4 **Structure milestone-based upgrade obligations** with penalties for missed iterations.
- 5 **Institutionalise field-feedback loops** from operational units back to manufacturers for rapid improvement.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

Use for defence indigenisation (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/indigenisation/>), atmanirbharta in security, and the procurement-reform debate.

“Treating drones as a purchase guarantees obsolescence; treating them as a partnership builds enduring capability.”

Drone Rules 2021, PLI for drones, iDEX, counter-drone systems.

Balancing the urgency of capability against the risk of vendor lock-in and crony capture tests integrity in defence procurement.

Connects to past questions on indigenisation of defence technology and the role of the private sector in defence.

Make in India, defence manufacturing, emerging warfare technologies, and civil-military innovation.

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/>), *PIB* (<https://pib.gov.in/>)

Source: From Purchase to Partnership: On India's Drone Strategy — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

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India should replace one-off drone procurement with long-term managed-service partnerships, because tactical drone systems need continuous iteration against fast-evolving battlefield threats.

 **SUPPORTING**

- Drones are software-defined and rapidly obsolescing, so a fixed purchase locks in capability that is outdated within months.
- Recent operations exposed the need for swift counter-drone adaptation that procurement cycles cannot match.
- A partnership model funds a domestic innovation ecosystem rather than a single delivery.

 **COUNTER**

Long-term partnerships risk vendor lock-in, inflated lifecycle costs, and dependence on a few firms with weak accountability for delivery.

 **WAY FORWARD**

Use iDEX and the drone PLI to build managed-service contracts with milestone-based upgrades, open standards, and multiple competing partners.

**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**Ujijari Current Affairs - ujijari.com · Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS**QUESTION**

'Indigenous drone capability is now central to national security. Discuss why India should move from transactional procurement to long-term innovation partnerships in tactical drone systems. (250 words)'

INTRODUCTION

Drones have moved from niche reconnaissance tools to decisive instruments of modern warfare. India's challenge is no longer whether to acquire them but how to sustain a capability that evolves faster than any procurement cycle.

BODY

Tactical drone systems are software-defined platforms whose value lies in continuous adaptation: new sensors, autonomy, swarming, and counter-jamming features emerge in months, not years. A transactional purchase of a fixed number of units freezes capability at the moment of contract, and by delivery the threat environment has already shifted.

The lessons of recent operations, where rapid counter-drone improvisation mattered more than raw numbers, underline this. The alternative is a managed-service partnership in which the state contracts manufacturers for an evolving capability backed by guaranteed upgrades, data feedback, and lifecycle support.

This reframes the problem from purchasing hardware to nurturing an innovation ecosystem. India already has scaffolding for this: the Drone Rules of 2021, the production-linked incentive scheme for drones, and the iDEX platform that funds defence start-ups.

The task is to align acquisition rules, which still favour lowest-cost one-time buys, with the iterative logic of drone warfare.

CONCLUSION

Treating drones as a purchase guarantees obsolescence; treating them as a partnership builds enduring capability. India's procurement reform must catch up with the tempo of the technology it seeks to field.

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