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DRDO Netra AEW&C System Gets Final Operational Clearance

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WHY IN NEWS

The indigenously developed Netra Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) system received its Final Operational Clearance, certifying it as fully combat-ready for the Indian Air Force. The milestone marks a significant step in India's drive for self-reliance in critical defence technologies.

WHAT IS AN AEW&C SYSTEM

An **Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C)** system is an aircraft fitted with a powerful radar and command-and-control suite that detects and tracks aircraft, missiles, and other threats over long ranges, well beyond the horizon visible to ground-based radars. Acting as an “eye in the sky,” it provides early warning and directs friendly fighters during air operations, functioning as a force multiplier in network-centric warfare.

THE NETRA SYSTEM

Netra is India's indigenous AEW&C system, developed by the **Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS)**, a laboratory of the **Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)**, based in Bengaluru.

Key Features

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FEATURE	DETAIL
Developer	DRDO, through the Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS)
Platform aircraft	Embraer EMB-145
Radar	Indigenous Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar
Coverage	Active Antenna Array Unit mounted on the fuselage for wide-angle surveillance
Role	Surveillance, threat detection, and direction of fighter aircraft

The system carries a primary AESA radar that can scan a wide arc of airspace, detect multiple targets simultaneously, and relay a real-time air picture to ground stations and fighter aircraft.

FINAL OPERATIONAL CLEARANCE

Final Operational Clearance (FOC) is the certification that a weapon system or platform has met all the qualitative requirements of the armed forces and is cleared for full operational deployment in combat roles. It follows **Initial Operational Clearance (IOC)**, which permits limited induction.

The grant of FOC to Netra confirms that the system has completed the full cycle of trials, including radar performance, electronic systems, and integration with the IAF's combat network.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT

The Netra programme is a flagship example of **self-reliance in defence (Atmanirbhar Bharat)**. AEW&C systems are among the most complex airborne platforms, and very few countries possess the capability to design and build them indigenously.

By developing Netra at home, India reduces dependence on costly foreign systems such as imported airborne warning and control aircraft, builds domestic expertise in AESA radar and airborne mission systems, and creates a base for more advanced follow-on programmes with larger radar coverage and longer endurance.

ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD

A credible early-warning capability is central to securing India's airspace along its western and northern borders, where rapid detection of incoming aircraft and missiles is decisive. Netra strengthens the layered air-defence architecture, complementing ground-based radars and surface-to-air missile systems.

The way forward lies in expanding the AEW&C fleet, advancing the next generation of systems with greater range and 360-degree coverage, and integrating airborne surveillance seamlessly with the broader Integrated Air Command and Control System. Sustained investment in indigenous radar and electronic-warfare technology will ensure that the surveillance edge keeps pace with evolving aerial threats.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Achievements of Indians in science and technology, indigenisation (<https://ujijari.com/vocab/indigenisation/>) of technology, developing new technology, and defence.

Prelims pointers: Netra developed by DRDO-CABS; platform aircraft Embraer EMB-145; AESA radar; difference between Initial Operational Clearance and Final Operational Clearance; AEW&C as a force multiplier.

Mains question: “Indigenous development of complex defence platforms is central to strategic autonomy (<https://ujijari.com/terms/strategic-autonomy/>). In this context, discuss the significance of India’s airborne early-warning programme and the challenges of self-reliance in defence technology.” (15 marks, 250 words)

FACTS CORNER

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

Netra: India’s indigenous Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) system.

Developer: Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS), a DRDO laboratory at Bengaluru.

Platform: Embraer EMB-145 aircraft.

Radar: Indigenous Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar.

FOC: Final Operational Clearance certifies a system as fully combat-ready; follows Initial Operational Clearance (IOC).

Role: Detects and tracks airborne threats beyond the horizon; directs fighters; a force multiplier in network-centric warfare.

DRDO: Defence Research and Development Organisation, under the Ministry of Defence; lead agency for defence R&D.

Sources: Defence Research and Development Organisation (<https://www.drdo.gov.in>), Press Information Bureau (<https://pib.gov.in>), The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com>)

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