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IAF Opens the AS-HAPS Stratospheric Airship Programme to Industry

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SECURITY & DEFENCE ·

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IAF Opens the AS-HAPS Stratospheric Airship Programme to Industry

14 July 2026 · 4 min read ·

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WHY IN NEWS

On , the Indian Air Force's **Directorate of Operations (Remote)** opened the **Airship-based High Altitude Pseudo-Satellite (AS-HAPS)** programme to **private industry**, seeking at least **two development partners**. The programme carries an outlay of about **Rs 15,000 crore** and is being executed under the **Make-I** category. It had earlier been cleared by the **Defence Acquisition Council (DAC)** in **February 2026**.

FILLING THE GAP BETWEEN DRONES AND SATELLITES

Modern surveillance operates in layers. Low-flying **drones** give tactical, close-in vision but cannot loiter for long or cover vast areas. **Satellites** in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) see everything but sweep past a location in minutes and cannot hover. Between these sits a fast-emerging class of platform: the **High Altitude Pseudo-Satellite (HAPS)**.

An **AS-HAPS** is a stratospheric **airship** that floats at around **20 km altitude (above 60,000 feet)**, well above commercial air traffic and weather. Because it can stay aloft for **months at a time**, it behaves like a stationary “pseudo-satellite” parked over a chosen area, combining the persistence of a satellite with the flexibility and lower cost of an aircraft. It bridges the gap between **High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) drones** and **LEO satellites**.

WHAT THE AIRSHIPS WILL DO

Persistent presence over a fixed patch of ground or sea makes HAPS platforms valuable across several missions:

CAPABILITY	ROLE
Ujiyari Current Affairs - ujiyari.com ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance)	Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS Continuous monitoring of borders and maritime approaches
ELINT (electronic intelligence)	Detecting and mapping adversary electronic emissions
Telecommunications	Acting as a high, stable relay node
Remote sensing	Environmental and terrain observation

For a country with **long, contested and high-altitude land borders** and a vast maritime zone, a fleet that can watch a sector without break for months is a genuine force multiplier. It reduces dependence on scarce satellite passes and on drones that must return to base.

THE PROCUREMENT ROUTE: MAKE-I

Why Make-I Matters

The programme is being run under **Make-I**, a category of the **Defence Acquisition Procedure** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/defence-acquisition-procedure/>) (**DAP**) that supports **indigenous design and development**. Under Make-I, the **government funds up to 70 per cent of the development cost**, sharing the financial risk of building a complex new platform from scratch. This is deliberately chosen to encourage Indian firms to attempt a technologically demanding system rather than import it.

Timeline of the Programme

- **February 2026:** The **DAC** accorded clearance (Acceptance of Necessity) for the AS-HAPS programme. This is the background approval.
- **14 July 2026:** The IAF issued the **request/procurement to private firms**, opening the programme to industry and seeking at least two development partners. This is the current news.

Keeping these two dates distinct matters for exam accuracy: the DAC clearance authorised the programme; the July step is the actual outreach to build it.

THE STRATEGIC LOGIC

The AS-HAPS push sits at the intersection of two national priorities. The first is **indigenisation** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/indigenisation/>) **of ISR**: reducing reliance on foreign surveillance platforms and building a sovereign capability that cannot be switched off in a crisis. The second is **defence self-reliance (Atmanirbharta)**, using domestic industry and government-funded development to grow India's defence manufacturing base. Together they point toward a **layered surveillance architecture**, drones for the tactical layer, HAPS airships for the persistent mid-altitude layer, and satellites for the strategic layer, along contested borders.

UPSC RELEVANCE

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GS Paper 3: Security, defence technology and indigenisation, developments in science and technology, and the role of the private sector in achieving defence self-reliance.

Prelims pointers:

- **AS-HAPS** = Airship-based **High Altitude Pseudo-Satellite**, opened to industry by the **IAF** on **14 July 2026**.
- Operates in the **stratosphere at around 20 km (above 60,000 feet)**, with **months-long endurance**.
- Bridges the gap between **HALE drones** and **LEO satellites**.
- Roles: **ISR, ELINT** (electronic intelligence), telecommunications and remote sensing.
- Outlay about **Rs 15,000 crore**; executed under **Make-I**, in which the government funds **up to 70 per cent** of development cost.
- Cleared by the **DAC in February 2026**; opened to private industry (at least two partners) on 14 July 2026.

Mains question: “High Altitude Pseudo-Satellites can form the persistent middle layer of India’s surveillance architecture. Discuss their strategic utility along India’s contested borders and the significance of the Make-I route in advancing defence self-reliance.” (15 marks, 250 words)

FACTS CORNER

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGEEDIA

Event (14 July 2026): IAF’s Directorate of Operations (Remote) opened the AS-HAPS programme to private industry, seeking at least two development partners.

Outlay: About Rs 15,000 crore.

Route: Make-I category of the DAP; government funds up to 70 per cent of development cost.

Prior clearance: DAC, February 2026.

Altitude: Stratosphere, around 20 km (above 60,000 feet); endurance of months.

Position in stack: Between HALE drones and LEO satellites.

Roles: ISR, ELINT, telecommunications, remote sensing.

Sources: *Ministry of Defence* (<https://mod.gov.in/>), *Indian Air Force* (<https://indianairforce.nic.in/>)

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