

UP Def Corridor: A National Imperative

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Defence manufacturing in India remained a mostly restricted and over-regulated area till the current NDA government had to face up to the security reality of self-reliance in defence as a strategic imperative. Since 2014, the government has made a concerted effort to woo the private sector to boost the defence-industrial capabilities and provide a much-needed competition and complementariness to defence PSUs. Some examples are the Strategic Partnership Model and the Innovations for Defence Excellence Programme (iDEX). But there are hiccups and 'miles to go.' As a good impetus, the Union Defence Ministry has earmarked around 64% (over Rs 70,000 crore) of its modernisation funds under the capital acquisition budget for 2021-22 for purchases from the domestic sector. It marks a large increase from 2020-21 (Rs 52,000 Crore). Along with measures like widening the negative import list, this is part of the 'push' under the Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign, where the defence sector core area for Make-in-India.

The defence corridors in UP and Tamil Nadu are the two mega projects to drive the Atma Nirbhar campaign. The UP government fully understands that the capability and viability of the defence and aerospace industry is built on the strength of supply chains, in which the MSMES are intricately intertwined. UP leads in the number of MSMEs among states, and these can play a crucial role in this ecosystem. The UP government has been putting special focus to provide special incentives to this sector in the policies in-line with Union guidelines.

The UP Defence Industrial Corridor is planned across 6 nodes -- Lucknow, Kanpur, Jhansi, Agra, Aligarh, Chitrakoot, which spreads across Central, East, West region of UP and along the Golden Quadrilateral connecting Delhi – Kolkata supported by networks of expressways i.e. Yamuna, Agra–Lucknow, Purvanchal, Bundelkhand, Gorakhpur and Ganga Expressway. IIT Kanpur and IIT Banaras Hindu University Varanasi have been approved by the UP government for establishment of Centre of Excellence related with Defence Industrial Corridor and allotted with the amount of Rs 2.00 Crore each against total approved amount of Rs 50.00 crore and Rs. 69.00 crore respectively in the financial year 2018-19. Many technical institutes have started working in collaboration.

Creation of industry ready land-banks for setting up of infrastructure for defence-Aerospace industries is a priority area for the state government. Almost 5071.19 hectares of land is to be acquired for the corridor. A guideline/procedure for allotment of Industrial Plots in Defence Corridor has been published for seamless land allotment procedures. A proposal to establish the Defence Park as a joint venture of UPEIDA and IIT, Kanpur on a 30-acre plot is being considered by the government of UP. Similar ones in corridor nodes like Kanpur, Jhansi, Aligarh, Chitrakoot, Agra and Lucknow and its expansion in other districts is planned.

Criticalities

A key for success of the defence corridors will be leadership across the spectrum. Innovative leaders who know how to find and nurture talent that is comfortable with handling quick, and even disruptive change. Leadership will have to be aware of design iterative processes and can build organisations that allow the free flow of communication and ideas. The bureaucratic structure and defence services must value these innovative traits and select and promote such leaders to critical innovation positions. An environment that advocates and follows a culture, values and processes that encourage the discovery of innovative ideas; and, where questioning and failure are accepted is needed. The political leadership at the centre and in UP seems to be ready for this.

The second criticality is a secure network of the ecosystem. Due to the magnitude and critical nature of the data and the global dispersion of the event network, there is a need for a platform using secure cloud architecture to store information and an anti-tamper Blockchain-based distributed ledger for military and vendor input on part supply levels. It needs to be proven against all foreseen cyber challenges ahead. This will require red-teaming challenges almost on a continuous basis.

(The author is the winner of AVSM VM (gallantry))