

In self-reliance boost, nod for industry to develop light tanks, jammers, simulators

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Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said customisation and uniqueness of military hardware was critical to hold the advantage of surprise over India's adversaries and that this could be achieved only if weapons and systems are developed in the country. (PTI PHOTO.)

In a renewed push for self-reliance in the defence sector, the government on Thursday gave its in-principle approval to a raft of indigenous defence projects that will involve design and development by the industry, with the military hardware covering light tanks, airborne stand-off jammers, communication equipment and simulators, officials familiar with the development said.

The defence ministry has cleared nine such projects: four under the 'Make-I' and five under the 'Make-2' categories of the Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020.

The 'Make' category of capital acquisition is the cornerstone of the Make in India initiative that seeks to build indigenous capabilities through the involvement of both public and private sector. 'Make-I' refers to government-funded projects while 'Make-II' covers industry-funded programmes.

"In a landmark step, the defence ministry has offered four projects to the Indian industry for design and development under Make-I category. The industry will be provided financial support for prototype development of these projects," the ministry said in a statement.

The four projects are for the design and development of light tanks, communication equipment with Indian security protocols, airborne electro-optical pod with ground-based system and airborne stand-off jammers.

Society of Indian Defence Manufacturers (SIDM) president SP Shukla welcomed the development. "These projects will have a positive cascading effect on the entire defence ecosystem," he said. SIDM had recently made a recommendation to the government to offer projects to the Indian industry under the Make-I category.

"This is for the first time since the launch of industry-friendly DAP-2020 that Indian industry has been involved in development of big-ticket platforms such as light tank and communication equipment with Indian security protocols," the ministry said.

The five projects approved under the industry-funded Make-II procedure are simulators for Apache attacks helicopters and Chinook multi-mission choppers, wearable robotic equipment for aircraft maintenance, autonomous combat vehicle and integrated surveillance and targeting system for mechanised forces.

Projects under 'Make-II' category involve prototype development of military hardware or its upgrade for import substitution for which no government funding is provided.

"The indigenous development of these projects will help harness the design capabilities of Indian defence industry and position India as a design leader in these technologies," the ministry added.

Another sub-category under 'Make' is 'Make-III' that covers military hardware that may not be designed and developed indigenously, but can be manufactured in the country for import substitution, and Indian firms may manufacture these in collaboration with foreign partners.

In the Union Budget announced on February 1, India earmarked ₹ 84,598 crore --- 68 % of the military's capital acquisition budget --- for purchasing locally produced weapons and systems to boost self-reliance in the defence sector, besides setting aside 25% of the defence R&D budget for private industry, startups and academia to encourage them to pursue design and development of military platforms.

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India will soon notify a new list of weapons and systems that cannot be imported. This will be the third positive indigenisation list --- the government has already notified two lists of 209 weapons and equipment that cannot be imported.

These include artillery guns, missile destroyers, ship-borne cruise missiles, light combat aircraft, light transport aircraft, long-range land-attack cruise missiles, basic trainer aircraft, multi-barrel rocket launchers, assault rifles, sniper rifles, mini-UAVs, specified types of helicopters, next-generation corvettes, airborne early warning and Control (AEW&C) systems, tank engines and medium-range surface-to-air missile systems.

After the first two lists were notified, the government has signed contracts worth ₹ 54,000 crore for domestic arms procurement, and deals worth ₹ 4.5 lakh crore are in the works.