

## Indigenise smart: Heavy investment in R&D is needed to take Indian defence production to next level

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In another step towards indigenisation of military platforms, the defence ministry has given the initial approval to projects worth Rs 76,390 crore. This includes the construction of eight next-generation corvettes for the navy, procurement of wheeled armoured fighting vehicles, and the manufacture of Dornier aircraft and Sukhoi-30 MKI aero-engines by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited. All the proposed capital acquisition will be under the 'Buy and Make Indian' rubric. The thrust on indigenisation was overdue. The war in Ukraine has starkly brought home the reality that India is too dependent on foreign defence imports, particularly from Russia. With at least over 50% of India's overall military assets of Russian make, New Delhi has been forced to walk a diplomatic tightrope on the conflict.

Plus, the performance of Russian military platforms in the war has been poor, with a large number of armoured fighting vehicles breaking down. Thus, India has to get out of this position where its foreign policy is constricted and a large part of its military arsenal may not deliver desired results. That said, indigenisation has to be done smartly. For the proposed construction of the eight indigenous corvettes, an Indian shipyard will be selected through competitive bidding. Unless tightly controlled, the bidding process could throw up controversies that defeat long-term objectives.

Additionally, while India has achieved 90% indigenisation in the 'float' (hull and superstructure) component of warship-building, the 'move' (propulsion) and 'fight' (weapons) components lag behind at 60% and 50% indigenisation respectively. Similarly, we are still far off from developing a fully indigenous aero-engine for military aircraft with the old Kaveri project having failed to meet standards. Overall, most of our indigenisation success has been in auxiliary and spares. But to take indigenisation to the next level we need to significantly up our investment in R&D and create a cutting-edge military-industrial ecosystem with universities, private sector and defence PSUs working in tandem. That in turn requires the Indian economy to grow at a high, sustained rate.