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ABOUT US

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

**REFORMING EVERYTHING,
ACQUIRING NOTHING**

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India has spent two decades perfecting its procurement procedures. It has not spent two decades procuring.

The Ministry of Defence declared as 2025 the “Year of Reforms.” By December, it reported DAC approvals worth over ₹3.84 lakh crore, contracts of ₹1.82 lakh crore signed, and the Defence Procurement Manual 2025 promulgated. In February 2026, the draft Defence Acquisition Procedure 2026 was placed in the public domain, promising a “transformative leap.” Yet as of Sep 2026, DAP 2026 remains unapproved. The armed forces still operate under DAP 2020, a six-year-old procedure the Ministry itself acknowledges is outdated. **The Year of Reforms produced a draft. The year after has not yet produced the reform.**

This is not new. Since 2002, India's procurement procedure has been rewritten at least eight times: DPP 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2016, DAP 2020, and now the draft DAP 2026. Each revisions announced streamlined processes and greater indigenisation. Each was followed by the same outcome: programmes that were delayed before the revision remained delayed after it.

The revolving door at the top tells the true story. The post of Director General (Acquisition), the officer shepherding every major capital procurement, has been held by at least five IAS officers since 2017, with an average tenure of roughly eighteen months for a role overseeing programmes spanning decades. Each officer arrives, familiarises themselves with a labyrinthine pipeline, and is rotated out before any programme reaches fruition. No DG (Acquisition) has served long enough to see a major platform through from approval to contract, let alone to delivery. The most consequential acquisition role in the Ministry is treated as a routine IAS posting.

The deeper pathology is accountability, or rather, its acute absence. The bureaucracy that allows the FICV to languish for seventeen years faces, at worst, a tepid CAG observation that will never be read because they would have moved to an entirely different ministry. Absolute authority over acquisition decisions, zero accountability for acquisition outcomes, this asymmetry is the single most corrosive feature of India's defence procurement system.

The DAC's output statistics are impressive, as statistics. In FY 2025–26, it accorded Acceptance of Necessity for fifty-five proposals worth ₹6.73 lakh crore. But an AoN is not a contract, a contract is not a delivery, and a delivery is not an operational capability. The FRCV received AoN in September 2024; as of Sep 2026, no RFP has been issued. The gap between the first RFI for this programme in 2015 and an actual product is now measured in decades. Meanwhile, DAP 2020 established five procurement categories, layered with Make-I, II, III sub-categories, the Strategic Partnership Model, iDEX, Design and Development, Fast Track, and emergency channels, approximately a dozen routes, each with its own thresholds, criteria, and approval chains. Every additional category is a bureaucratic hiding place.

The case studies are alarming. The MMRCA tender was issued in 2007 for 126 fighters. The Rafale was selected in 2012. The tender was scrapped. An emergency purchase of 36 jets followed in 2016. The MRFA programme for 114 Rafales was conceived in 2018; by early 2026, a ₹3.25 lakh crore proposal was cleared, but the contract has stalled over source code and IP rights. From original tender to potential signing: nearly two decades, during which IAF squadron strength depleted from forty-two to roughly thirty. The FRCV, conceived in 2010 as the Future Main Battle Tank to be ready by 2020, has been through three RFIs and three AoNs. The Army's primary tank remains the T-72, a 1970s design. The FICV, launched in 2008, has been through two AoNs, two EoIs, one retraction, and multiple RFIs. Seventeen years on, it remains pre-RFP while the BMP-2 soldiers on. The Naval Utility Helicopter, first tendered in 2010, was the Strategic Partnership Model's flagship. Years later, the Chetak, a 1950s-era design, still flies from warships.

India may be the only major military power that responds to procurement delays by rewriting the manual, while others have simplified. The US Adaptive Acquisition Framework replaced a rigid process with six tailored pathways; its Middle Tier pathway compresses timelines through iterative design-build-test cycles. The SPEED Act of 2025 mandates outcome-based framing, specifying "a survivable, mobile direct-fire platform" rather than "a 40-ton tracked vehicle with a 120mm gun", letting industry propose solutions. South Korea's DAPA consolidated acquisition into a single empowered agency in 2006; the result is indigenous fighters, howitzers, and tanks fielded within timelines unimaginable here. Israel moved Iron Dome from concept to deployment in under four years. Neither uses L1, the lowest bid, as the primary selection criterion. Both evaluate on the best value: capability, delivery, lifecycle cost, and industrial benefit. India's L1 default ensures the cheapest bid wins, not the best capability. It results in choosing value over price.

The trials bottleneck is equally solvable. Indian field trials consume twelve to twenty-four months across deserts, glaciers, and jungles. Programmes stall for years when a winter window is missed. The global defence industry has moved to digital twin technology, AI-powered virtual models that simulate extreme heat, altitude, electromagnetic interference, and vibration with fidelity approaching physical testing. The US F-35 and FLRAA

programmes validate designs virtually, compressing timelines dramatically. A US DoD radar digital twin has demonstrated performance metrics comparable to the deployed system. For a country testing equipment from minus forty degrees to plus fifty across altitudes from sea level to eighteen thousand feet, virtualisation is an imperative, not a luxury. DAP 2026 proposes a two-stage trial process but does not embrace virtualisation as a fundamental alternative in 2026 in what can only be termed as the software development capital of the World.

Even India's emergency mechanism fails on its own terms. The CAG found in late 2025 that seventy-two per cent of emergency procurement contracts missed delivery timelines. Post-Operation Sindhoor, emergency powers were granted to fast-track arms acquisition. When off-the-shelf purchases cannot meet compressed deadlines, the system is not merely slow; it is fundamentally misaligned with operational tempo. The flaw is structural: emergency tenders select vendors without verifying manufacturing readiness at the required scale. DAP 2026 extends the Fast Track timeline from one to two years, an honest admission, but a symptomatic fix.

India does not need another procedural rewrite. It needs five things: finalise DAP 2026 and impose a five-year moratorium on revisions; collapse procurement categories to three: Buy Indian, Buy with Transfer of Technology, Buy Global; replace L1 with best-value evaluation and place responsibility on the bureaucracy and the decision maker to choose value instead of hiding behind price; mandate digital twin-based virtual testing for all platforms above ₹2000 crore; and make manufacturing readiness a binding condition for emergency procurement.

India's armed forces are not short of approvals. They are short of equipment. The distinction is the distance between a press release and a battlefield, and it is measured not in rupees but in national security.

Declaration

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