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BEYOND DAP 2026: REDESIGNING INDIA'S DEFENCE ACQUISITION ARCHITECTURE: FROM PROCESS DRIVEN PROCUREMENT TO CAPABILITY DRIVEN ACQUISITION

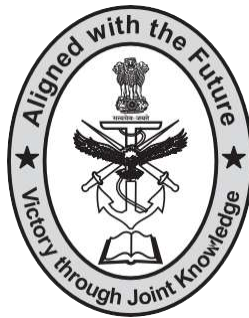
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ABOUT US

CENJOWS was raised in 2007 as an independent think tank, registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. This aims to promote Jointness as a synergistic enabler for the growth of Comprehensive National Power and provide alternatives in all dimensions of its applications through focused research and debate.

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DEFENCE ACQUISITION ARCHITECTURE: FROM
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DRIVEN ACQUISITION**

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Beyond DAP 2026: Redesigning India's Defence Acquisition Architecture: From Process Driven Procurement to Capability Driven Acquisition



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Abstract

India's defence industrial base has expanded rapidly under successive policy reforms, and the draft Defence Acquisition Procedure 2026 carries that effort further. This paper argues that the binding constraint on capability acquisition has moved from the procedure to the institutional architecture that applies it. Accountability for capability rests with the user, while authority over acquisition is distributed across organisations that answer for process. The paper proposes differentiated acquisition regimes for strategic platforms, mature systems and fast-moving digital technologies, with common frameworks to keep networked systems interoperable; a revised approval architecture with a higher CCS threshold and delegation matched by auditability; a living capability plan; a clearer division between DRDO development and procurement; user ownership of acquisition through Project Management Organisations; risk-based quality assurance; greater autonomy for DPSUs; and a leaner acquisition establishment. It proposes time to capability as the governing measure of performance.

Introduction

India's defence ecosystem has undergone a fundamental transformation over the past decade. The country has moved substantially beyond an era in which defence modernisation was predominantly associated with import dependence, limited domestic industrial capacity and restricted participation by the private sector.

The transformation is increasingly visible in the numbers. India's defence production reached a record ₹1.78 lakh crore in FY 2025–26, compared with ₹1.54 lakh crore in FY 2024–25. Defence exports reached a record ₹38,424 crore in FY 2025–26, while the private sector's contribution to defence production rose to approximately 24 per cent.¹ The Ministry of Defence had already signed a record 193 contracts worth ₹2.09 lakh crore in FY 2024–25, of which 177 contracts worth ₹1.69 lakh crore were awarded to domestic industry.²

The policy architecture has contributed significantly to this transformation. The Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020 strengthened the preference for indigenous design and manufacture and created greater opportunities for domestic industry.³ The Ministry subsequently introduced a series of reforms aimed at increasing indigenous content, improving ease of doing business, promoting innovation and accelerating procurement.

The draft Defence Acquisition Procedure 2026 represents another significant step. It proposes reducing procurement categories from five to four, increasing indigenous content in the Buy (Indian-IDDM) category from 50 to 60 per cent, introducing Technology Readiness Level (TRL) based categorisation, creating Long Term Bulk Acquisition and Low-Cost Capital Acquisition pathways, refining the Fast Track Procedure and permitting greater delegation for emerging and shorter cycle technologies. It also proposes greater flexibility in quality assurance, two stage trials, spiral development and assured orders for selected Make and iDEX programmes. Importantly, it seeks to monitor timelines from the Request for Information stage onwards and encourage concurrent rather than sequential activities.⁴⁵

The urgency is now being voiced at the highest levels. At the Naval Commanders' Conference that opened in New Delhi on 29 September 2026, the Raksha Mantri emphasised indigenous capability development and technology absorption, the Chief of Naval Staff called for accelerating technology absorption and capability

development, the Chief of Defence Staff called for accelerated technology transformation and seamless data sharing, and the Chief of the Army Staff stressed Tri Service synergy and interoperability.⁶ There is, in other words, agreement at the apex on the need for faster induction of technology and capability. What remains is to equip the acquisition system to deliver it.

These are important reforms. They also raise a larger question, namely whether India's defence acquisition problem has now moved beyond the acquisition procedure itself, and this paper argues that it has. India has spent considerable effort improving the rules governing acquisition. The next major reform should therefore examine the institutional architecture through which those rules are implemented, with the objective of redesigning the system so that military capability reaches the user at the speed demanded by operational necessity and technological change.

From Procurement to Capability Acquisition

Defence acquisition is fundamentally different from other government procurements. The purpose of any ordinary procurement is generally to obtain a product or service economically, transparently and in accordance with established rules. Defence acquisition has a completely different objective. It must create a military capability within a timeframe determined by operational necessity, the threat environment and the technology cycle while it should also follow the other norms. This distinction is becoming increasingly important.

A submarine, aircraft carrier, combat aircraft or major missile system will definitely require extensive technical, financial and strategic scrutiny. Such systems involve large investments, complex technologies, long development cycles and major strategic consequences. The same institutional philosophy cannot, however, automatically be applied to every electronic system, communications system, sensor, cyber capability, software platform, AI-enabled application, unmanned system or counter-drone capability, where technology cycles are now measured in months and a few years. A procurement process that takes several years to acquire a system whose technology cycle is itself only a few years may satisfy every procedural requirement and yet fail to create the intended military capability.

The Ministry of Defence informed the Standing Committee on Defence in 2024 that the acquisition of defence equipment can take between 19 and 26 months. The

Committee described this as a stretched timeline given the strategic risks involved and recommended faster procurement to prevent acquired technology from becoming obsolete.⁷ Delay does not end when the contract is signed. In Report No. 28 of 2025, the Comptroller and Auditor General found that in 72 per cent of the contracts it examined, all placed under the Fast Track Procedure for the Army's emergency procurements, deliveries were delayed beyond the stipulated timelines.⁸ Even the fastest contracting route does not by itself deliver capability on time.

The central question must therefore change, from whether the acquisition process has been successfully completed to whether the required capability is being delivered when the user needs it. The two are not necessarily the same.

Accountability Must Follow Authority

One of the most important structural issues is the relationship between responsibility and authority. The Services identify operational requirements and ultimately remain responsible for the consequences of capability gaps. The operational commander cannot explain away a missing capability by pointing to a procurement file pending elsewhere. Yet a substantial part of the acquisition process is conducted through elaborate structures within the Ministry of Defence and through dedicated acquisition organisations in Service Headquarters. This creates a structural disconnect, in which the user carries the operational responsibility while multiple organisations outside the direct user chain exercise procedural authority over the acquisition.

Every organisation involved may be performing a legitimate function, and the problem lies in the cumulative effect. Specifications are scrutinised, financial advice is obtained, trials are conducted, quality assurance is undertaken, commercial negotiations take place, multiple committees examine the proposal, and approvals move through different levels. Each individual step may be defensible, yet the overall system can become slow. The case made here is for aligning authority with accountability while retaining financial scrutiny, technical evaluation, transparency and audit.

The basic principle should be that the organisation responsible for delivering a capability should possess commensurate authority over its acquisition, within clearly defined financial, technical and audit boundaries. Where the user is accountable for the operational outcome, the user must not become merely one participant in a procurement process controlled elsewhere.

This disconnect has an institutional expression at the apex. Under the Allocation of Business Rules as amended in December 2019, the Department of Military Affairs, which came into being on 1 January 2020 under the Chief of Defence Staff, is responsible for procurement exclusive to the Services “except capital acquisitions, as per prevalent rules and procedures”.⁹ Capital acquisition, which determines the long-term capability of the services, therefore remains with the Department of Defence. Any redesign of the acquisition architecture must settle where capital acquisition authority should reside between the two departments, and how joint prioritisation through the Department of Military Affairs and HQ IDS should shape acquisition as integrated theatre structures take shape.

Different Acquisitions Require Different Regimes

India should move away from the assumption that every defence acquisition requires essentially the same institutional mechanism. A future acquisition architecture should distinguish between at least three broad categories.

- **Major strategic platforms**

Aircraft carriers, submarines, major combat aircraft, major missile systems, complex armoured platforms and other strategically important acquisitions should continue to receive comprehensive scrutiny. For such programmes, the involvement of the Ministry of Defence, Service Headquarters, Finance, technology organisations, industry and political leadership is justified.

- **Mature and relatively straightforward systems**

Where the technology is mature, the operational requirement is clear and development risk is limited, acquisition should be substantially simpler. The Services should have greater delegated authority to procure such systems, subject to competition, financial scrutiny and audit.

- **Rapidly evolving technologies**

The third category is increasingly important. Cyber systems, communications, electronic warfare, sensors, AI-enabled systems, unmanned systems, software, counter-drone technologies and other digital capabilities require an acquisition philosophy designed around short technology cycles. For these categories,

India should consider a mandatory Fast Track Digital and Technology Acquisition regime, subject to clearly defined eligibility criteria.

Beyond the purchase of the product itself, the acquisition contract should provide for technology refresh, upgrades, interoperability and evolution over a defined period, potentially five years. This would shift the philosophy from buying a static system to acquiring an evolving capability.

The draft DAP 2026 already recognises this requirement through its proposed Low-Cost Capital Acquisition route, refined Fast Track Procedure, Technology Readiness Level based categorisation and provisions for spiral development, and the next step is to institutionalise it. A mandatory fast pathway must also carry enforceable delivery obligations and project-level monitoring after contract signature, since the CAG's findings on the Army's emergency procurements show that speed of contracting does not by itself secure timely delivery.⁸ For digital and communication systems it must further build security accreditation, trusted source requirements and Indian ownership of design and source code, which the draft DAP 2026 already emphasises,¹⁰ into the pathway itself so that assurance does not reappear later as a separate sequential stage.

Decentralisation carries a risk that must be addressed directly. Communication networks, command and control systems, sensors, data links and other digital systems derive their value from working together across services, commands and, increasingly, sectors such as telecommunications, space and energy. If each user procures independently and quickly, the result can be faster induction of systems that cannot exchange data, do not share a common security baseline and cannot be upgraded together, recreating the stovepipes that jointness is meant to remove. For networked and digital capabilities, speed and interoperability must be secured together.

The answer lies in separating the setting of standards from the act of buying. Architecture, interface and data standards, waveforms and protocols, cryptographic and cyber security baselines, and the rules for upgrade and certification should be fixed centrally and in advance as common frameworks,

owned jointly by the Department of Military Affairs, HQ IDS and the Services. Where a capability is inherently enterprise wide, such as a Tri Service network backbone, procurement itself should be centralised. Where it is not, users and PMOs should be free to procure quickly and independently if what they buy complies with the common framework. Compliance with a framework verified once and accepted by all would then replace much of the case-by-case scrutiny that now slows each acquisition. Central definition of standards and decentralised acquisition within them are complementary, and together they allow the system to move quickly without fragmenting.

Rethinking the Approval Architecture

The financial and political approval structure also requires fundamental examination. The scale of India's economy and defence budget has changed considerably over the years. Acquisition values have increased, while the necessity for faster procurement has increased further. Approval thresholds that were once appropriate now need to be enhanced manifold.

The threshold for mandatory consideration by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for major acquisition proposals should be reviewed and substantially enhanced. A threshold in the region of ₹25,000 crore could be considered as one possible benchmark, subject to the nature and strategic sensitivity of the acquisition. The precise number should be determined after a comprehensive review of the existing Competent Financial Authority structure, taking as its baseline the present ceilings for each authority set out in Appendix J to Chapter II of DAP 2020,¹¹ and of the financial scale of modern defence acquisition.

The principle, however, is important. CCS should concentrate on acquisitions of genuinely strategic, exceptionally large or politically sensitive consequence, rather than becoming a routine approval layer for an expanding number of large-value acquisitions.

A revised CCS threshold should be accompanied by proportionate delegation below that level. For example, lower value acquisitions could progressively be approved at Service Headquarters and other competent financial authority levels. Larger acquisitions could move through the Vice Chiefs, Defence Acquisition Council and Raksha Mantri within clearly defined ceilings. CCS would remain the approving

authority for acquisitions above the strategic threshold and for projects whose political, strategic or international implications warrant consideration irrespective of value.

Financial value should determine the normal level of approval, while strategic sensitivity should provide an independent trigger for escalation. A ₹10,000 crore acquisition involving a mature, indigenous technology should not necessarily require the same approval pathway as a much smaller programme involving highly sensitive strategic technology.

Delegation with auditability

Higher delegation must not mean weaker controls, and every delegated authority should operate within:

- clearly defined financial ceilings.
- standardised acquisition templates.
- independent financial concurrence.
- competitive procurement wherever feasible.
- digital audit trails.
- defined timelines.
- mandatory recording of deviations.
- post contract review; and
- periodic higher-level audits.

A digitally enabled acquisition architecture can make delegated decision-making more transparent rather than less transparent. The principle should therefore become approval by the lowest competent authority, with effective oversight by the higher authority, a model that can strengthen governance.

The Integrated Capability Plan Must Become a Living Architecture

India has had long-term capability planning in various forms for several decades, so the issue is not an absence of planning. Traditional long-term planning can struggle, however, when technology cycles change faster than planning cycles. The Integrated Capability Plan should therefore evolve from a relatively static acquisition roadmap into a living capability architecture and should continuously identify: -

- enduring military capabilities.

- immediate operational gaps.
- emerging threats.
- emerging technologies.
- indigenous industrial capacity.
- technology obsolescence.
- upgrade pathways; and
- capabilities that can be rapidly inducted when technology matures.

The plan should specify what capability the nation needs, rather than prematurely determining which platform must be purchased. This distinction will become increasingly important as warfare becomes more software defined, networked, autonomous and data intensive, and the capability plan should therefore be periodically refreshed rather than treated as a fixed shopping list.

DRDO: Development, Not Default Procurement

India's development ecosystem also requires a clearer division of responsibility. DRDO has an indispensable role in developing strategic, emerging and niche technologies where commercial incentives may be inadequate or where national technological autonomy is essential. Development and procurement, however, are fundamentally different functions.

Where industry already possesses a mature solution that meets a validated Service requirement, the existence of a government development organisation should not automatically result in another development cycle. Conversely, where the required technology does not exist, is immature or is strategically critical, DRDO should be provided the resources, time and institutional freedom to develop it.

The principle should be that DRDO should develop what the nation needs to develop; industry should supply what industry can supply; and the services should acquire what the services require. The three functions should complement one another rather than compete for the same space, and DAP 2026's proposed changes to the Development cum Production Partner framework for DRDO projects indicate that this distinction is already receiving attention.

The Acquisition Organisation Itself Needs Restructuring

DAP reform cannot be complete without examining the size and structure of the acquisition establishment. Over several decades, organisations have been created to address individual problems relating to procurement, standardisation, inspection, quality assurance, financial scrutiny and technical evaluation, and each may have had a sound rationale when established. The Acquisition Wing of the Ministry was itself created in 2001 on the recommendations of the Group of Ministers that followed the Kargil Review Committee to integrate what was then a fragmented process, and the first Defence Procurement Procedure followed in 2002.¹² The procedure has since been reviewed repeatedly, including by the Dhirendra Singh Committee in 2015.¹³ The question today is whether the cumulative structure remains optimal and whether a layer created to integrate acquisition has itself become a layer to be reformed.

The acquisition establishment should therefore undergo a comprehensive organisational review, with the objective of eliminating duplication, reducing layers and moving wherever possible from sequential to concurrent processing. The ultimate objective should be a substantially leaner acquisition organisation, potentially reducing the manpower employed in existing layers by as much as three fourths wherever digital processing, delegation and risk-based assurance make those layers unnecessary. That figure is offered as an order of magnitude for the proposed review, which should begin by establishing the present strength of each layer. The exercise is one of organisational redesign, distinct from administrative downsizing, and its goal should be fewer layers, greater expertise and clearer accountability.

User Directorates Should Own User-Level Acquisition

Service Headquarters should also examine whether dedicated procurement directorates need to continue in their present form for every category of acquisition. For mature and relatively straightforward requirements, the user directorate should become the acquisition owner, supported by lean professional acquisition, finance, legal and technical expertise. For large and complex projects, a dedicated Project Management Organisation (PMO) could be created, and each PMO should have:

- a named project director.
- integrated user representation.
- finance representation.

- acquisition expertise.
- technical expertise.
- clearly defined financial authority.
- Milestone-based timelines; and
- accountability for delivery.

The PMO should remain responsible from project initiation through contract execution and induction. The most important change would be that the project has an identifiable owner, since a system in which responsibility is distributed across several organisations, but authority is not clearly located inevitably creates delays.

Quality Assurance Should Become Risk-Based

Quality assurance cannot be compromised in defence, but it does not necessarily require every procurement to pass through identical institutional processes. DAP 2026 proposes greater flexibility for the services in choosing the mode of quality assurance trials and seeks to reduce acquisition timelines, and this principle should be extended.

For mature commercial technologies, accredited third party certification, simulation, vendor qualification and appropriate user testing should be used wherever feasible. For complex strategic systems, safety critical equipment, aviation systems, ammunition and other high-risk categories, comprehensive government oversight should remain.

The principle should be risk-based assurance, not organisation-based assurance. Standardisation and quality assurance organisations should therefore be substantially rationalised while retaining a small core of independent technical competence for safety-critical and strategic systems. This would preserve quality without allowing quality assurance itself to become an automatic sequential stage for every acquisition.

DPSUs Should Become More Autonomous

The restructuring of the Ordnance Factory Board into seven defence public sector companies was a major institutional reform. The next step should be greater operational and commercial autonomy for DPSUs, with greater freedom to:

- Invest.
- Innovate.

- Form joint ventures.
- Enter technology partnerships.
- Develop export markets.
- Restructure product portfolios; and
- Compete with private industry.

Government oversight should increasingly focus on strategic direction, corporate governance, financial performance, national security obligations and audit, without unnecessary involvement in operational management, since autonomy and accountability must go together. The substantial growth of India's defence industrial base suggests that the policy environment is increasingly capable of supporting such autonomy, and the institutional framework should now allow Indian defence enterprises to exploit this opportunity more effectively.

Finance Must Become an Enabler of Informed Decisions

Financial scrutiny is indispensable to public procurement, and it is most effective when applied in the context of operational requirements and technological changes. A financial adviser examining a capability proposal needs to understand not only its financial implications but also the operational consequences of delay, the technology cycle and the cost of a capability gap. Financial advisers need not become advocates for procurement, but financial prudence must be applied in the context of capability consequences.

The Ministry has already moved in the direction of greater financial delegation. In June 2026, the revised Delegation of Financial Powers for the Defence Services increased several delegated powers, introduced additional Competent Financial Authorities and expanded powers for joint Service procurement and indigenisation. The stated objective was faster decision-making and timely availability of resources to the Services.¹⁴ These delegated powers apply to revenue procurement, which is governed by the Defence Procurement Manual 2025.¹⁵ This is an important direction of reform, and the next step should be to extend the same philosophy into capital acquisition.

The chronic shortage of specialist accounts officers (IDAS cadre) and staff in financial and acquisition organisations also requires examination. Excessive deputations from the IDAS cadre can create shortages in parent organisations while failing to provide

sustained specialist capacity in critical acquisition functions. A comprehensive manpower review should therefore examine sanctioned strength, actual vacancies, specialist skill requirements and the long-term sustainability of deputation arrangements.

The Real Currency of Defence Acquisition Is Time

In its 2019 audit of capital acquisition in the Indian Air Force, the CAG found that each procurement case passed through 11 stages from initiation to the signing of the contract and attributed delays essentially to this complex approval process involving multiple levels.¹⁶ Ultimately, the effectiveness of the acquisition system should be measured by something other than the number of files processed, the number of committees convened or even the number and value of contracts signed. The fundamental metric should be the time taken from identification of a validated operational requirement to the availability of an effective capability with the user, and every major acquisition should therefore have:

- a validated operational requirement.
- a named accountable authority.
- a defined acquisition route.
- a maximum timeline for every major stage.
- concurrent processing wherever possible.
- delegated financial powers.
- an escalation mechanism for delay; and
- a clearly identifiable person or organisation accountable for delivery.

A delay should not simply be recorded as a “process delay”. The system should establish where the decision was pending, why it was pending and who had the authority to resolve it, which is the essence of accountability.

Towards a New Defence Acquisition Architecture

The reforms proposed above can be brought together into a relatively simple architecture.

- **Strategic acquisitions**

Major strategic platforms and exceptionally high-value acquisitions should receive comprehensive central and political scrutiny.

- **Major but nonstrategic acquisitions**

These should operate through delegated approval structures with strong financial and technical oversight.

- **Mature systems**

These should increasingly be acquired through user-led and delegated mechanisms.

- **Digital and fast-moving technologies**

These should have mandatory accelerated pathways, with technology refresh and upgrade provisions built into contracts.

- **Common frameworks**

Interoperability, data and security standards should be defined centrally and in advance, with enterprise-wide systems procured centrally and other digital systems procured by users within those frameworks.

- **Indigenous development**

DRDO should concentrate on strategic, emerging and niche technologies, while mature industrial capability should be allowed to compete and deliver.

- **Quality assurance**

QA should become risk-based, retaining strong independent competence for safety-critical and strategic systems.

- **Industrial entities**

DPSUs should receive greater operational autonomy, accompanied by strong corporate governance and audit.

- **Organisational structure**

The acquisition establishment should become smaller, more professional, more digitally enabled and more accountable.

The task is therefore bigger than reducing the number of forms, committees or approvals. It is to redesign the relationship between the user, the acquisition organisation, Finance, industry, DRDO and the political leadership.

Conclusion

India has demonstrated that sustained policy intervention can transform the defence industrial ecosystem. The growth in indigenous production, defence exports, private sector participation, MSMEs, start ups and indigenous technologies demonstrates that India's industrial base is responding to the policy environment. The government has also recognised the need for further acquisition reform. DAP 2026 proposes greater delegation, technology readiness-based acquisition, new procurement pathways, faster procedures, spiral development and concurrent processing.

The next challenge, however, is going to be different. The state must redesign its acquisition machinery to exploit the industrial and technological capability that its own reforms have helped create.

What India now needs is a new acquisition architecture, founded on the principles set out in the preceding section and designed to place controls at the right level to ensure that accountability follows authority and to make procedures enhance capability.

India's defence reforms have brought the country to a point where the domestic industrial ecosystem is increasingly capable of responding to military requirements. The next question is whether the acquisition system can respond with equal speed.

The next generation of defence reform should therefore move beyond reforming the Defence Acquisition Procedure. It should redesign the architecture through which India converts resources, technology and industrial capacity into military capability.

In future conflict, the decisive advantage may belong less to the country that possesses the technology first than to the country that can put the right capability in the hands of its soldier, sailor or airman first.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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