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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES

CENJOWS

Recasting Defence Ties: Co-Development with Israel and the UAE



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Abstract

Indian strategic commentary has settled on a comfortable formula: Atmanirbharta has moved India from a client in its West Asian defence relationships to a partner. The formula is rarely examined, and the two years covered by this paper make examination unavoidable. In the financial year ending March 2026, India's defence exports rose by nearly sixty-three per cent to a record figure; three weeks later, SIPRI's five-year data confirmed India as the world's second-largest importer of major arms, with imports barely down and the order pipeline pointing upward. Both statements are true. This paper contends that once self-reliance and leverage are distinguished, they no longer contradict each other. Self-reliance asks whether India can build what it requires, and here the record remains uneven. Leverage asks what partners would lose if India withdrew, and here India's position has shifted considerably. Indian plants now manufacture for foreign principals, most notably the only Hermes 900 line outside Israel, while Emirati capital flows into Indian production rather than Indian systems into Emirati inventories.

Examining the Israeli and Emirati partnerships through the literature on tiered arms production and on coproduction and offsets, and testing that reading against Operation Sindoor and the 2026 war on Iran, the paper defines the Atmanirbhar Guardrail, distinguishes it from strategic autonomy and asymmetric interdependence, and reconstructs the industrial base beneath it. It identifies the ceiling the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement of August 2026 places on India's reach in the Gulf, examines four weaknesses affecting the model's durability, and offers six recommendations, each with responsible institutions, an implementation mechanism, a timeline and measurable outcomes.

Keywords

Atmanirbharta, defence industrial base, co-development, coproduction, offsets, technology transfer, Israel, United Arab Emirates, Akash, Akashteer, Hermes 900, defence exports, Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, strategic autonomy.

Two Facts That Do Not Sit Together

Two announcements made a fortnight apart in the spring of 2026 describe what appear to be different countries.

On 2 April the Ministry of Defence reported that India’s defence exports for the financial year just ended had reached ₹38,424 crore, an increase of 62.66 per cent over the previous year, with the number of exporting entities up from 128 to 145.[1] Set against the ₹686 crore recorded in 2013-14, that is a fifty-six-fold rise across twelve years.[2] The export basket had by then widened well past finished platforms, into weapon-locating radars, fire-control systems, torpedo-handling equipment, night-vision devices and coastal surveillance radars.[3] Production told a similar story: ₹1.78 lakh crore for the year, up 15.6 per cent, with the private sector’s share at an all-time high of roughly a quarter of the total.[4]

Three weeks earlier, on 9 March 2026, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute had published its five-year survey of international arms transfers.[5] India appeared in it as the world’s second-largest importer of major arms for 2021-25, behind only wartime Ukraine, with about 8.2 per cent of the global total. Its imports were four per cent lower

than in the previous five-year period. SIPRI credited part of this fall to India's growing ability to design and manufacture its own weapons, though it added an important caveat: domestic programmes are still running well behind schedule, and India's pending and planned orders suggest that its reliance on foreign suppliers will continue and is likely to grow.[6]

Both numbers hold up, and neither reflects any statistical sleight of hand. India's arms exports are growing about as quickly as those of any country, and India is still among the largest purchasers of foreign weaponry. An account of the move from client to partner that foregrounds the first point and passes over the second becomes advocacy rather than analysis, and much recent Indian commentary falls into exactly that trap.

This paper contends that the two facts can be reconciled once we distinguish between two ideas that Indian writing tends to conflate. Self-reliance is a question about India's own needs and whether domestic industry can meet them. Leverage is a question about other states and how far they have come to depend on Indian production. On the first question, the record of Atmanirbharta is modest, more so than its supporters allow. India still relies on foreign suppliers for its most important systems and will do so for years to come. On the second question, the record is better than critics usually acknowledge. Indian firms now work inside foreign supply chains, building parts and whole platforms that other militaries use, whereas earlier they mostly received finished goods at the far end of those chains. It is this change of position, not a fall in imports, that has given India's industrial capacity some diplomatic weight.

Israel and the United Arab Emirates are the two partners with whom this change has gone furthest, and they are worth studying together because they look so different. India remains one of Israel's biggest customers and at the same time manufactures equipment that Israel's own forces use. In the Emirati case, the flow runs the other way, with Abu Dhabi supplying the money and India the production lines.

Read together, they show the mechanism operating in both directions. The sections that follow establish the analytical vocabulary, audit the industrial base on which both

relationships depend, examine each vector in turn, specify the regional limit imposed on the model in August 2026, and assess where it is weak.

Tiers, Coproduction and the Real Source of Leverage

The scholarship on arms production is old enough and precise enough to discipline loose claims about self-reliance, and it repays returning to.

Stephanie Neuman's 1984 study of stratification in military industries remains the essential starting point. Her argument was that arms-producing states occupy a hierarchy measured not by how much they build but by how deep their capabilities run, and that movement up that hierarchy is unusually hard because the upper tiers consist of design, propulsion and advanced sensing rather than of assembly.[7] Keith Krause, returning to the same structure eight years later, explained why that difficulty survives the spread of production. Diffusion across the international system, he found, had been broad but shallow, generating a great many assemblers and very few innovators, and so a state's industrial output and its strategic dependence can grow together for decades without either cancelling the other.[8] Richard Bitzinger then supplied the sequel. Writing about the globalised industry of the 2000s, he described the mode that has since become dominant: second-tier producers enter first-tier supply chains as specialised suppliers rather than attempting to compete as rivals.[9]

That last mode is where India now sits, and mistaking it for something else is the source of most confusion about what Atmanirbharta has achieved.

Neuman’s less-cited work on offsets is more useful still for present purposes. Writing in 1985 on coproduction, barter and countertrade, she observed that such arrangements are rarely defensible on narrow economic grounds and are entered into for political reasons by both parties: the recipient wants technology, employment and standing, the supplier wants market access and the political relationship that a production line creates.[10] The part of that observation which Indian analysis tends to skip is that the political relationship binds the supplier too. A firm that has put a production line inside a partner’s territory has bought a market, but it has also placed a piece of its own capacity under someone else’s export policy, industrial policy and political weather.

This is the analytical distinction on which everything that follows depends, and it is worth stating plainly. Self-reliance asks: can India build what India needs? Leverage asks, ‘what would others lose if India stopped?’ The Indian record since 2020 is considerably stronger on the second question than on the first, and the persistent tendency to answer the second while claiming credit for the first is why the literature and the commentary talk past each other.

Laxman Behera’s assessment of the Indian defence industry, published before the present expansion, identified the gap between manufacturing capacity and design capability as the structural problem at the heart of Indian defence industrialisation.[11] A decade on, that diagnosis stands. What has changed is scale. Indian manufacturing capacity has become large enough and reliable enough on delivery that foreign principals have begun routing their own production through it, and that is a different kind of asset from the one the self-reliance literature was written to measure.

The Arthashastra makes the same point in its own idiom, treating the treasury and the armoury as the ground on which every other instrument of statecraft stands, and insisting that a ruler’s navigation among many powers proceeds from accumulated strength rather than from the goodwill of others.[12] The Atmanirbhar Guardrail, as this paper uses the term, restates that idea for a modern defence economy. Because the phrase carries much of the argument that follows, it needs a precise definition.

The Atmanirbhar Guardrail is defined here as the condition in which foreign partners depend on Indian defence production enough that cutting supply to India, or using supply as a bargaining chip against it, would cost them something they are not prepared to lose. It has three elements. The first is a domestic floor: enough indigenous capacity in assembly, sustainment and ammunition to keep Indian forces operating if a supplier hesitates. The second is reciprocity: production lines, components or sustainment on which a partner’s own forces rely are located in India. The third is that this capacity is offered without alignment: partners obtain it on commercial and strategic terms, and membership of a bloc is not part of the price. The guardrail exists where all three elements are present, and its strength can be observed and measured: in the share of a partner’s production or sustainment sited in India, in the number of foreign principals routing

production through Indian plants, and in the Indian design content of what those plants make. It is a limit rather than a lever. Its purpose is to stop dependence from narrowing Indian choices, not to give India a means of coercing others.

This makes the guardrail different from strategic autonomy, with which it is easily confused. Strategic autonomy is a foreign-policy objective: the freedom to decide on the basis of India's own reading of its interests, without being bound by alliance commitments. Its best-known recent statement, *Nonalignment 2.0*, treats it as a matter of keeping options open across a wide range of relationships.[13] The guardrail is narrower and has more material. It describes an industrial condition rather than a diplomatic posture, and it shows up in contracts, production lines and delivery records rather than in voting patterns or joint statements. Autonomy can be declared; the guardrail has to be built. A state can claim strategic autonomy while depending heavily on a single supplier, as India did for decades with the Soviet Union. The guardrail is what makes that claim affordable in a crisis.

It differs, too, from the idea of asymmetric interdependence. In the account developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, power in an interdependent relationship comes from asymmetry: the less dependent party can use the other's dependence to secure asymmetric outcomes in bargaining.[14] Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman later showed how states that sit at the central nodes of global networks can convert that position into coercive pressure.[15] The guardrail does not aim at outcomes of this kind. India's defence relationships with Israel and with its Western suppliers remain asymmetric in the partners' favour, and nothing in the evidence presented here suggests that this will change soon. What the Guardrail seeks is more limited: dependence that runs in both directions at particular points, so that the asymmetry which remains cannot easily be turned against India. Leverage in the sense used in this paper is therefore defensive. It is measured by what partners would lose, and it can be priced in negotiation, but it is not designed for coercion.

Defined in this way, the Guardrail can be tested. The sections that follow ask how much of each element is actually in place in the Israeli and Emirati relationships.

The Industrial Base Beneath the Diplomacy

Neither bilateral relationship can be assessed without first establishing what the policy machinery has actually built, because the diplomacy of the next two sections is only as durable as its substructure.

The instruments are well known. The Defence Acquisition Procedure of 2020 ranks procurement categories so as to privilege Indian design and development over mere Indian manufacture, making indigenous design content rather than indigenous content the formal test of preference.[16] Since August 2020, the Department of Defence Production and the Department of Military Affairs have notified successive Positive Indigenisation Lists, which place time-bound import embargoes on named items, while the SRIJAN portal matches those items to domestic vendors. Around these sit the Innovations for Defence Excellence scheme, the defence industrial corridors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the Technology Development Fund and a liberalised foreign investment regime.[17]

The aggregate numbers are impressive and slightly misleading. More than thirty-three thousand items have been offered to industry through SRIJAN since inception; over fifteen thousand seven hundred had been indigenised by June 2026; the defence public sector undertakings report import substitution worth roughly ₹9,000 crore across five years.[18] Against a defence budget that rose from ₹2.53 lakh crore in FY 2013-14 to ₹6.81 lakh crore in FY 2025-26, ₹9,000 crore over half a decade is a real achievement and a marginal one.[19]

The composition of the sixth Positive Indigenisation List, notified in August 2026, is more revealing than the headline count. It covers 405 items with a business potential of about ₹3,070 crore, and those items are line replaceable units, sub-assemblies, spares, components and raw materials for platforms designed elsewhere.[20] This is import substitution at the level of the bill of materials. It is genuinely useful; it employs a great many small firms, and it does almost nothing about the categories that determine tier: aero-engines, seekers, active electronically scanned array radar, and high-end electronic warfare. Those remain the places where foreign content is both highest and hardest to replace, and no list of spares will reach them.

What policy documents could not supply, two operations did.

The first was Operation Sindoor. On the night of 7-8 May 2025, Pakistani drones and missiles were directed at military installations from Srinagar and Jammu across to Bhuj and were engaged by the Integrated Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems Grid and the layered air defence behind it. The Ministry of Defence's own account of the episode placed the indigenous Akash system, the Akashteer command-and-control network and Indian counter-drone and electronic warfare capability at the centre of the result.[21] The Director General of Air Operations singled out Akash's performance publicly.[22] The operation also saw the combat debut of loitering munitions bought under emergency provisions and jointly developed with Israel.[23] For the purposes of this paper, the significance was commercial as much as operational. A system with a combat record is a different proposition in an export negotiation from a system with a brochure, and the enquiries examined below date from after May 2025 rather than before it.

The second was the war on Iran that began on 28 February 2026. Its bearing here is on the demand side. Gulf states took missile and drone strikes on their own soil, confidence in external guarantees was shaken in a way that had not happened before, and air and missile defence became the scarce commodity in the regional market. India, at that moment, held an affordable, combat-proven and politically unencumbered air-defence layer. Nothing about this was planned. It is nonetheless the reason the industrial conversations examined below acquired urgency in 2026 rather than drifting on for another decade.

Israel: Buyer, Builder, and Supplier to Its Own Supplier

Israel is the harder case for the client-to-partner thesis, which is why it is the more useful one.

On its face, the evidence runs the other way. Prime Minister Modi's state visit to Israel on 25 and 26 February 2026 was accompanied by Indian and Israeli press reporting of a defence package somewhere between eight and ten billion dollars, covering elements of Israel's layered missile-defence architecture, the Hermes 900 medium-altitude long-endurance unmanned aircraft, and a range of precision munitions including guidance kits

and air-to-surface missiles.[24] If those numbers are even approximately right, this was among the largest single-country procurement packages India has undertaken, and it describes a buyer.

The public record is a different document from the press coverage, and the gap between them is itself worth examining. The India-Israel Joint Statement issued on 26 February elevated the relationship to a Special Strategic Partnership for Peace, Innovation and Prosperity and listed sixteen signed agreements. Not one of the sixteen is a defence instrument. Defence receives a single short paragraph, which welcomes a Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation signed on 4 November 2025 and notes that the two leaders had provided a vision and a roadmap for the future.[25] The sections on critical and emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, cyber security, trade and investment run to several thousand words and account for nearly all the signed instruments, among them a critical and emerging technologies initiative placed under the two national security advisers and a letter of intent for an India-Israel Centre of Excellence in Cybersecurity to be set up in India.[26]

The asymmetry is not an oversight. As the defence relationship has grown, it has moved out of the joint statement register and into commercial contracting and technology channels that leave no public instrument behind. That is the industrial-policy counterpart of de-hyphenation, the longstanding refusal to let anyone West Asian relationship be read as a function of the others: India can keep Israel, Iran and the Arab Gulf in play simultaneously only if the most sensitive part of the Israeli relationship is conducted quietly. The analytical consequence is that the official record understates the relationship consistently. The policy consequence is that Parliament, the press and the research community are all scrutinising the wrong document.

Direction of flow is where the client-to-partner claim finds its strongest support, and it has little to do with the procurement figures.

India does not merely buy Israeli platforms; it builds them. The Adani-Elbit Advanced Systems joint venture at Hyderabad runs the only Hermes 900 production facility anywhere outside Israel, and trade reporting establishes that more than twenty of the

aircraft, including carbon composite aerostructures made in India, have been delivered to Israel itself.[27] Adjacent Indian lines cover the Hermes 450 and the SkyStriker loitering munition, the latter acquired by the Indian Army through an Elbit joint venture with Alpha Design Technologies and subsequently used in Operation Sindoor.[28]

A state hosting the sole external production line for a platform central to another state's order of battle is not a client in any sense the word will bear. It is a supplier to its own supplier.

The leverage this generates is undramatic and easily overstated if one is not careful. India is not going to interrupt deliveries, and the commercial value of the arrangement is small beside the scale of Indian procurement. But leverage is measured by what the other party stands to lose, and what Israel would lose is production capacity sited outside the threat envelope within which its own industry now operates. Israeli industrial facilities are themselves targets. A line in Hyderabad, on the far side of the Arabian Sea, is not a commercial convenience under those conditions; it is strategic redundancy. India has not yet negotiated as though it understood this.

The technology channel is where the relationship's future is actually being decided, and it is the part that receives the least attention. The critical and emerging technologies initiative agreed in February 2026, covering artificial intelligence, quantum and critical minerals under the two national security advisers, is the plausible route to capability at the tiers India has failed to reach by domestic effort.[29] Israel's ambassador to India described the visit's security agenda in those terms in advance, framing it as an updating of bilateral security agreements to permit work on more sensitive projects and jointly developed technological solutions.[30] Whether that channel yields design capability or simply deeper integration into Israeli supply chains is an open question, and the honest answer at present is that there is not yet enough evidence to say. Section VII returns to it.

One sequence deserves recording without over-interpretation. The Special Strategic Partnership was announced on 26 February 2026. American and Israeli strikes on Iran began on 28 February.[31] India concluded the most significant upgrade of its Israeli

relationship in three decades forty-eight hours before that partner entered an interstate war which closed the strait carrying a large share of Indian energy imports. The timing was in all likelihood coincidental. The exposure it created was not.

The Emirates: Capital in Search of a Factory Floor

The Emirati relationship is the clean case, because there the direction of the industrial flow is not in doubt.

It has also been built slowly and on purpose, which is a more encouraging sign. The thirteenth meeting of the India-UAE Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, held in New Delhi in July 2025 and convened at the secretary level for the first time, agreed to pursue joint manufacture of models similar to the arrangement between ICOMM of India and CARACAL of the UAE for small arms and discussed co-development in artificial intelligence, shipbuilding including refits and upgrades, and maintenance of common platforms; a memorandum was signed between the Indian Coast Guard and the UAE National Guard.[32] In January 2026, during the UAE President's state visit to New Delhi, the two governments signed a letter of intent to conclude a framework agreement on a strategic defence partnership, alongside instruments on space, energy and investment and an undertaking to double bilateral trade to two hundred billion dollars by 2032.[33] The letter of intent already sketched what would follow, naming defence industrial collaboration, defence innovation and advanced technology, training, education and doctrine, special operations and interoperability, and cyberspace and counter-terrorism as the fields to be covered.[34] The framework was concluded in Abu Dhabi in May 2026 as the Strategic Framework for Defence Industrial Collaboration. Its declared scope is wider than industry: joint production of unmanned systems, missiles, naval platforms and ammunition, but also training, exercises, education and doctrine, special operations and interoperability, maritime security, cyber defence, secure communications and information exchange.[35]

What makes this consequential is that it inverts the pattern of the last fifty years. Gulf defence procurement has run from Western suppliers into Gulf treasuries, and the Emirates have been among the largest arms importers in the international system

throughout. The Indian proposition reverses the polarity: Emirati capital into Indian manufacturing capacity, producing for both inventories and for onwards export. That co-development, rather than sales, was where the real potential of India-Gulf cooperation lay had been argued before the present framework existed, and the argument has aged well.[36]

The ICOMM-CARACAL arrangement works well as a template precisely because there is little that is novel about it. Small-arms coproduction transfers relatively little technology, but it teaches a great deal at the institutional level, establishing the contracting, certification and quality-assurance processes that any larger venture will later rely on. Most defence-industrial partnerships fail at this level, well before technology becomes the constraint.

The ongoing talks are more ambitious in scope. Recent analysis reports discussions between the two sides covering the Akash and BrahMos missiles and the Akashteer command-and-control network for air defence and argues that the partnership will acquire real strategic depth only when it moves from buying and selling platforms to transferring technology or producing jointly.[37] That is the right test to apply, and on present evidence the relationship does not yet pass it. Years of exercises, Desert Eagle, Desert Cyclone and Gulf Star among them, and regular contact between the services have made the two militaries familiar with each other. Neither government has yet made an industrial commitment that would be expensive to walk away from.

Abu Dhabi stands out as the logical first buyer of India's air-defence systems for two reasons. The first is the nature of the threat it faces. The UAE has recently experienced drone and missile attacks firsthand, and a layered, low-cost architecture oriented toward countering drones, of the kind represented by Akash and Akashteer, meets that threat more economically than sophisticated Western systems designed for a different kind of conflict. The second reason concerns what the Indian offer does not come with. Indian systems carry fewer conditions than American ones and no expectation of political alignment. For a state whose trust in external security guarantees has been shaken and which is managing a difficult relationship with its main Gulf neighbour, that absence of strings is a large part of the appeal.[38]

Armenia is a useful point of comparison, though it also shows where the comparison runs out. Yerevan has served as the testing ground for Indian defence exports, acquiring Akash, Pinaka, Swathi weapon-locating radars and anti-drone systems under contracts worth nearly two billion dollars, and displaying them openly as a sign of its strategic realignment.[39] Armenia, however, is only a buyer. Abu Dhabi intends to invest, which ties the two sides together more durably, and the UAE also has a defence-industrial sector of its own with which Indian firms can work as partners rather than simply as suppliers. What Armenia proved is that Indian systems work in service and can find buyers. The UAE offers something else: the prospect of systems that the two countries own together.

The Makkah Pact and the Ceiling on Indian Reach

Since August 2026, the model has operated under an external constraint, one that India neither created nor can remove.

On 7 August 2026, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan signed a trilateral mutual defence treaty at Makkah, declaring that an armed attack on any one of the three would be treated as an attack on all.[40]

The agreement extended and multilateralised the bilateral Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement concluded between Riyadh and Islamabad in September 2025, to which the Ministry of External Affairs had responded at the time by observing that it formalised a longstanding arrangement and that India would study its implications for national security.[41] The timing was not incidental. By August, Saudi Arabia had absorbed repeated missile and drone strikes on its own territory, and confidence in Washington’s willingness to underwrite Gulf security in real time had visibly eroded.[42] Reporting since indicates ministerial, political and military committees and a permanent secretariat in Saudi Arabia, with the first secretary-general drawn from Pakistan.[43] Careful assessments describe the pact as more institutionalised than a symbolic declaration but considerably less developed than an alliance.[44] Saudi or Turkish military participation in an India-Pakistan contingency is nonetheless judged improbable.[45]

The military reading of the pact has been done at length elsewhere. Its industrial consequences have attracted far less comment, yet they bear more directly on the argument of this paper.

Türkiye is more than one more signatory. Turkish firms already sell defence equipment to both Riyadh and Islamabad, and the pact gives a direct competitor formal standing in unmanned systems and air defence, the two segments in which India has most to offer. The Saudi market, the largest in the region, is therefore likely to stay largely closed to Indian systems for years. The reason is not hostility in Riyadh towards India. It lies in the industrial arithmetic of a grouping anchored by Pakistan and Türkiye. This goes a long way towards explaining why India's defence-industrial effort in West Asia has concentrated on two capitals instead of spreading across the Gulf. New Delhi would do well to say so openly and present that concentration as a considered response to a structural limit; otherwise, it will be read as the accidental product of two good bilateral relationships.

The pact also sharpens a question about what India should keep refusing. Shortly before the war began, the Israeli prime minister floated a regional "Hexagon alliance" that would have joined Israel with Greece, Cyprus, India and some of the Abraham Accords states.[46] New Delhi did not take the idea up and was right not to. Much of the value of the industrial model described in this paper comes from the fact that it does not require India to choose sides. Emirati money will keep flowing into Indian factories, and Gulf buyers will stay interested in Indian air defence, only while regional capitals are satisfied that India has not joined a bloc led by Israel. The Makkah pact raises the stakes. In a region splitting into opposing camps, a large outside partner that belongs to neither camp is harder to find and therefore worth more. Industrial partnership without alliance should not be mistaken for hedging or indecision. It is the most useful thing India has to offer.

Critical Assessment: Four Weaknesses in the Model

The model is real. Its durability rests on four conditions, none of which is presently satisfied, and naming them precisely is more useful than a general caution about challenges ahead.

- **Assembly is not design**

  The Positive Indigenisation Lists have delivered breadth, and not depth, and the distinction is not pedantic. Their contents are overwhelmingly sub-assemblies, spares and components for platforms designed abroad, and the ₹9,000 crore of import substitution generated across five years is modest beside total procurement.[47] Assembly-tier participation and design-tier ownership produce different kinds of leverage. An assembler can be replaced by relocating a production line, which is expensive and slow but entirely possible. A design owner cannot be replaced at all. The Hyderabad arrangement, valuable as it is, remains licensed assembly at the edge of a foreign principal's supply chain rather than co-development in the sense the term properly implies. The Defence Acquisition Procedure already contains the right instrument in its preference for Indian design and development; what it lacks is any equivalent test for international industrial partnerships, which continue to be assessed on indigenous content rather than on indigenous design content.

- **Coproduction has been added to import dependence, not substituted for it**

  The second weakness is the one SIPRI states without hedging. Indian arms imports fell by four per cent between the two most recent five-year periods, India's share of global imports remains second only to Ukraine's, and the order pipeline points toward continued reliance.[48] The February 2026 Israeli package, at whatever its true value turns out to be, is itself the illustration: the single largest event in the Israeli relationship during the period studied here was a purchase. The defensible formulation is that Atmanirbharta has changed what India does with its imports, embedding a growing share of them in domestic production and sustainment, without yet changing how much it imports. That is a genuine achievement and a smaller one than the rhetoric implies.

- **A partner at war is an unreliable supplier**

  The third weakness belongs to the Israeli vector and was exposed by the events of 2026. A supplier whose industrial base is simultaneously a belligerent's war

asset cannot be relied upon for delivery schedules, because Israeli capacity is allocated to Israeli requirements first. This is not a complaint about Israeli conduct; it is a structural property of the relationship, and Indian planning assumptions have not absorbed it.

The corollary is the more interesting half and has gone almost unremarked. The same war that made Israeli supply uncertain made Indian production capacity more valuable to Israel, for the reason given in Section IV. Indian negotiators have so far approached Indian-based production as a commercial opportunity to be won rather than as a strategic good with a price.

- **Producing for a belligerent carries a political cost that has not been managed**

  The fourth weakness is the one Indian commentary most often declines to state, and declining to state it does not make it go away. Indian-manufactured components and platforms have been delivered to a state engaged in operations that much of the international community, including a good part of the Global South constituency, India has spent a decade courting, regards as unlawful.[49] India's declaratory position on Palestine has not shifted. Its industrial conduct has been read by critics as inconsistent with that position, and the Gulf partners on whom the Emirati vector depends on are watching both.

  Denial is not available; the record is public. Abandonment would forfeit precisely the leverage set out above. What remains is codification. A published statement of end-use and end-user criteria governing production-for-partner arrangements, together with the review mechanism applying during armed conflict, would convert an unmanaged exposure into a stated policy and give Indian diplomacy an answer where it currently has only a silence. The parallel with the codification gap in India's sea lane protection arrangements is exact and not coincidental: in both domains India has built a capability that works and has declined to write down the rules governing its use.

Recommendations

The six recommendations below are addressed chiefly to the Ministry of Defence, acting through the Department of Defence Production and the Defence Acquisition Council, and to the Ministry of External Affairs, with supporting roles for DRDO, the Services and the defence public sector undertakings. They are ordered by expected impact, from the highest to the most diffuse. For each, the institutions that should lead, the instrument through which it would be implemented, an indicative timeline and the measures by which progress can be judged are set out separately.

- **Apply the indigenous-design test to international industrial partnerships:** Procurement documents currently describe licensed assembly, coproduction and co-development in the same language. An assembly arrangement can therefore be presented as co-development, and partners have little reason to go further. A formal classification, with separate design-content thresholds and approval routes for each category, would address the first weakness identified in Section VII more directly than any other measure proposed here.

  Responsible institutions: Acquisition Wing of the Ministry of Defence (drafting); Defence Acquisition Council (approval); DRDO (certification of design content).

  Implementation mechanism: A new chapter in the next revision of the Defence Acquisition Procedure defining the three categories, each with a minimum Indian design-content threshold (indicatively, below 20 per cent for licensed assembly, 20 to 50 per cent for coproduction, and above 50 per cent with jointly held intellectual property for co-development) and requiring every partnership proposal placed before the Council to be classified accordingly.

  Timeline: Draft classification released for industry consultation by June 2027; in force for all new partnership proposals from the start of FY 2028-29.

  Measurable outcomes: Number and share of approved international partnerships in each category, published in the Ministry’s annual report; average Indian design content of approved partnerships rising year on year; at least one in four new partnerships approved from FY 2028-29 qualifying as co-development.

- **Publish end-use and end-user criteria for arrangements in which India manufactures for partners.** India has no public answer to the question of when equipment made in Indian plants may pass to a partner's armed forces, including forces engaged in armed conflict. A short, published statement would close that gap at little cost and would strengthen India's position with every party involved, since partners and critics alike would know the rules in advance.

  Responsible institutions: Department of Defence Production, as licensing authority for munitions-list items under Category 6 of the SCOMET list, jointly with the Ministry of External Affairs; National Security Council Secretariat to chair the conflict-period review.

  Implementation mechanism: A published policy statement under the SCOMET framework setting out end-use and end-user conditions for items manufactured in India for foreign principals, together with a standing inter-ministerial review committee (Department of Defence Production, Ministry of External Affairs and National Security Council Secretariat) that convenes automatically whenever a recipient becomes party to an armed conflict.

  Timeline: Draft statement within six months, by mid-2027; statement published and review committee constituted by December 2027.

  Measurable outcomes: Statement in the public domain; all existing production-for-partner authorisations reviewed against it within twelve months of publication; an annual public summary of authorisations issued under it, by category and region; a record of each occasion on which the review committee is convened and its decision.

- **Recognise industrial redundancy as a strategic asset and price it accordingly.** For Israeli and Emirati principals, production capacity in India is worth more than its commercial value because it lies beyond the reach of West Asian threats. Indian negotiators have so far behaved like contractors competing for orders. They should instead ask for design-level access to technology, a share of work on seekers and sensors, and testing rights. This is also how the critical

and emerging technologies channel with Israel can begin to add depth instead of further breadth.

Responsible institutions: Department of Defence Production and the relevant territorial divisions of the Ministry of External Affairs (negotiating mandates); National Security Council Secretariat (critical and emerging technologies channel with Israel); DRDO (technical assessment of design-access terms).

Implementation mechanism: A standard negotiating mandate, approved by the defence minister, that makes design access, workshare on seekers and sensors, and testing rights required items in every new or renewed production-for-partner agreement, using government procurement and export authorisation as the points of leverage; the Hermes 900 arrangement at Hyderabad to serve as the first case.

Timeline: The mandate was adopted by December 2027 and applied to every agreement concluded or renewed from January 2028.

Measurable outcomes: Number of agreements containing design-access and testing-rights clauses; value of Indian workshare on seekers and sensors; number of joint design teams or transferred design authorities in partner programmes, reported annually.

- **Present the Gulf offer as an integrated air-defence package rather than as individual platform sales.** Akash, Akashteer, counter-drone capability, training, ammunition and through-life support should be sold together. Lasting influence in an arms relationship comes mainly from sustaining a system over its service life. Selling launchers while leaving the support chain to others would reproduce, with the roles reversed, the dependence India has spent a decade trying to escape.

  Responsible institutions: Department of Defence Production (lead, export promotion); Bharat Dynamics Limited and Bharat Electronics Limited (prime contractors for Akash and Akashteer); DRDO; Indian Army and Indian Air Force (training); Ministry of External Affairs and the Embassy of India in Abu Dhabi (government-to-government channel).

Implementation mechanism: A single government-to-government offer to the UAE under one lead agency, bundling systems, training, ammunition and a through-life support contract of at least ten years, and including a jointly owned maintenance and repair facility in the UAE financed in part by Emirati capital under the May 2026 Strategic Framework for Defence Industrial Collaboration.

Timeline: Package offer tabled at the next meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, and in any case by the end of 2027; signed contract targeted by the end of 2029.

Measurable outcomes: A signed package contract; a support component of at least ten years and a defined share of contract value; maintenance and repair facility operational; and a number of UAE personnel trained in India each year.

- **Ring-fence funding for the technology tiers that indigenisation lists cannot reach.** Propulsion, active electronically scanned array radars, seekers and electronic warfare will decide whether India remains an assembler. Progress in these areas needs money that is protected over a ten-year horizon instead of being sanctioned project by project. The same four areas are the natural agenda for the technology channel with Israel.

  Responsible institutions: Ministry of Defence (Finance) and the Ministry of Finance (funding instrument); DRDO and the Department of Defence Production (programme management); National Security Council Secretariat (alignment of the Israeli technology channel with the same priorities).

  Implementation mechanism: A non-lapsable ten-year allocation for the four areas, either as a dedicated window within the Modernisation Fund for Defence and Internal Security recommended by the Fifteenth Finance Commission or as a separate budget head, with milestone-based release to DRDO laboratories, defence public sector undertakings and private firms, including through the Technology Development Fund and iDEX.

  Timeline: Allocation created in the Union Budget for 2027-28 or, at the latest, 2028-29; mid-term programme review in 2032; ten-year cycle completed by 2037.

Measurable outcomes: Annual allocation released in full and not diverted; number of indigenously designed subsystems in the four areas clearing qualification trials; Indian design content of these categories in new procurement, reported annually to the Standing Committee on Defence.

- **Align the industrial and diplomatic calendars.** The Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, the India-UAE Defence Industry Partnership Forum and the service-to-service exercise programme each run on their own schedule and report through their own channel. Tying the outputs of the industrial framework to requirements set by the Services, and reporting both through one mechanism, would let defence diplomacy and industrial cooperation support each other instead of moving in parallel.

  Responsible institutions: International Cooperation Division of the Ministry of Defence (coordination); Department of Defence Production (industry forum); Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (exercise programme); Gulf Division of the Ministry of External Affairs.

  Implementation mechanism: A single annual India-UAE defence work plan, adopted at each meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, which schedules exercises to include trials or demonstrations of jointly produced equipment, with one consolidated progress report to the Defence Secretary each year.

  Timeline: First combined work plan adopted at the next committee meeting and no later than the end of 2027; first consolidated report in 2028.

  Measurable outcomes: A work plan adopted and reviewed annually; a number of exercises featuring jointly produced or Indian-supplied systems; a number of service requirements met through the industrial framework; and a single consolidated annual report replacing separate reporting streams.

Progress on all six could be reported in a single annual statement to the Standing Committee on Defence. That would also give Parliament the document Section IV found to be missing: a public record of the defence-industrial relationship as it actually operates.

Conclusion

India entered 2026 asserting that self-reliance had made it a partner rather than a client in West Asia. It ended the period under study as the world's second-largest importer of major arms, as the operator of the only Hermes 900 line outside Israel, as the prospective industrial base for Emirati defence capital, and as the supplier of a combat-proven air-defence architecture to a region that had just discovered how badly it needed one. Each of these descriptions is correct. The first seems to contradict the other three only until self-reliance and leverage are treated as separate questions, at which point the contradiction disappears.

For the defence-industrial domain, the Atmanirbhar Guardrail should therefore be understood in the sense defined in Section II: a position inside a network of mutual dependence, not a wall that keeps Indian decisions free of outside influence. India still depends on others. The difference is that several of the partners on whom it depends now depend on India in return, and at points that matter to them. This is a smaller claim than the language of self-reliance suggests. It is nonetheless a stronger one than import figures on their own would support, and it fits the evidence assembled here better than either the optimistic or the sceptical reading.

Most of what decides whether India can hold this position lies in its own hands. Moving from assembly to design is a matter of money and priorities. Managing the political risk of building equipment for a country at war is a matter of writing down rules. The Saudi market is the exception, closed for reasons India cannot change, and the sensible response is to concentrate on the partners where progress is possible instead of spreading effort thinly across the Gulf. The experience of 2025 and 2026 shows that industrial capacity has become a practical tool of Indian statecraft in West Asia and that India's use of it has moved faster than the doctrine meant to guide it. A similar lag between what India can demonstrably do and what it has formally codified appears wherever it has recently gained new means of influence in the region. Closing that lag is the task that still lies ahead.

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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