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**India's Push For Self-Reliance
and Its Impact on Military
Capability: Identifying
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Operation Sindoor**

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India's Push For Self-Reliance and Its Impact on Military Capability: Identifying Challenges in The System Post Operation Sindoor

Abstract

For the soldier standing watch on the Line of Control, Atmanirbhar Bharat is not merely a national aspiration—it is measured by the reliability of the drone overhead, the clarity of the night-vision device, the availability of ammunition, and the speed with which essential equipment reaches the frontline. Drawing on the operational lessons of Operation SINDOOR, this article examines the widening gap between India's ambitious vision of defence self-reliance and its delivery at the tactical edge. It highlights important achievements, including Tejas, BrahMos, Pinaka, ATAGS, indigenous helicopters and rising defence exports, while exposing continuing weaknesses in surveillance, electronic warfare, propulsion, advanced electronics, munitions and critical supply chains. The article argues for a pragmatic dual-track strategy: empower soldiers with timely, reliable capabilities today while building technological independence for tomorrow through faster procurement, decentralised decision-making, stronger industry–user partnerships and sustained investment in indigenous innovation.

Keywords: Atmanirbharta, Self-Reliance, Operational Realities, Indigenisation, Strategic Autonomy, Op SINDOOR

Introduction

Operation SINDOOR became a ground wherein the 'men in uniform' demonstrated not only courage but also adaptability. They operated under intense pressure, improvised solutions when equipment fell short, and leveraged their training and professionalism to overcome adversities. Yet, their experience also revealed the widening gap between the ambition of *Atmanirbharta* (Self-Reliant) and its present realities at the tactical level. This essay therefore seeks to highlight existing fault lines and the challenges that frontline troops encounter because of the gap between policy intent and operational delivery and also give a way ahead.

Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence is a noble and correct idea. Its strategic rationale is beyond dispute—India cannot remain dependent on foreign suppliers for its security in a world of fractured

supply chains, sanctions, and technology denial. Yet, at the tactical level, soldiers are today bearing the cost of its slow implementation. The ban on Chinese-origin equipment — logical from a security and geopolitical standpoint — has had unintended consequences for troops on the LoC. Where earlier units could leverage inexpensive but functional systems sourced through commercial channels (such as surveillance drones, optics, or certain communication gear), they now face shortages as indigenous substitutes are still in development or entering service at a slow pace.

Meanwhile, across the LoC, the adversary has no such constraints. Pakistan, with the full backing of China, has access to cheap, mass-produced, yet effective equipment: drones, thermal imagers, secure communications, and counter-drone systems (Wezeman, P.D., Gadon, J. and Wezeman, S.T. 2023). These may not match the sophistication of Western systems, but they are good enough to tilt the local balance. For Indian soldiers who have, through hard-fought operations, maintained moral and tactical ascendancy along the LoC, this narrowing of the qualitative edge is deeply concerning. It risks undermining the confidence of troops who know they can fight and win, but also know that their equipment is not always keeping pace with the adversary's.

Operation SINDOOR highlighted this dilemma in sharp relief. While the joint planning and execution of the operation was a success, and while Indian forces proved their professionalism once again, the gaps in ISR coverage, electronic warfare, and rapid replenishment of precision munitions were evident. Troops, at the cutting edge, found themselves having to innovate around shortcomings, often relying on sheer grit where better technology could have eased the burden. These lessons are not theoretical—they are operational realities that shape morale, confidence, and battlefield outcomes.

The essence of this essay, therefore, is not to dismiss Atmanirbharta but to present, from the vantage point of the soldier on the LoC, the urgent need to balance long-term aspirations with short-term operational effectiveness. The policy of self-reliance is strategically indispensable, but its gestation will be long. India will need two to three decades to build an industrial base that can rival global leaders in critical areas such as aero-engines, semiconductors, and advanced

electronics (IDSA, 2020). In the interim, soldiers cannot be left to carry the burden of under-equipment while adversaries across the fence field effectivesystems in large numbers.

This essay will therefore explore the key fault lines in India's push for self-reliance, assess the challenges encountered at the tactical level due to current procurement and indigenisation policies, and propose a way ahead that ensures that operational readiness is not sacrificed at the altar of industrial ambition

Evolution of Atmanirbharta

For those who serve at the tactical edge, *Atmanirbharta* is not a policy slogan, it is a lived reality. The soldier on the LoC does not measure self-reliance by government notifications or procurement manuals; he measures it by the reliability of his rifle, the endurance of his surveillance drone, the clarity of his night-vision device, and the speed with which ammunition and spares reach him during a firefight. From this vantage point, the evolution of *Atmanirbharta* in India's defence industry tells a story not only of policy ambition but also of the long, uneven journey of capability that ultimately filters down to the platoon and company level.

When India became independent in 1947, it inherited little more than a handful of ordnance factories and a modest industrial base. The wars of 1962, 1965, and 1971 revealed, in brutal sequence, the cost of relying on external suppliers for critical weaponry. In each case, battlefield realities were shaped as much by geopolitics and embargoes as by the skill of our troops. The Kargil War of 1999, where the Army had to scramble for winter clothing, specialised munitions, and surveillance equipments, once again reinforced the dangers of dependency (Raghavan, S. 2019). These experiences left a deep imprint on the Indian Armed Forces: no matter how well-trained or motivated, troops are always constrained by the tools placed in their hands. Against this backdrop, successive governments sought to reform the system. The establishment of Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) and the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) provided baseline capacity but also entrenched monopolies and inefficiency. Later, efforts like the Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) and eventually the Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020

attempted to bring in transparency and encourage private participation. Ambitious targets were set under the Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020, aiming for ₹1.75 lakh crore in production and ₹35,000 crore in exports by 2025. The introduction of initiatives such as Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) sought to encourage start-ups, while the corporatisation of ordnance factories was meant to inject accountability (PIB, 2021). The recent update of the Defence Procurement Manual to fastrack, simplify and rationalise revenue procurement procedure in September 2025 by MoD is one more such attempt at clearing the cobwebs and the quagmire.

On paper, this evolution appears steady and progressive. Yet at the ground level, the impact has been uneven. For a Company Commander on the Line of Control, the promise of *Atmanirbharta* translates into the actual kit issued to his men. The ban on Chinese-origin equipments, for instance, was entirely justified at the national level for reasons of security. But on the ground, it meant that the small drones and commercial optics once available through local procurement channels vanished overnight. The Indian alternatives are still arriving, slowly, and in limited quantities. In the meantime, the enemy opposite continues to field cheap Chinese drones, thermal imagers, and handheld jammers. They may be inexpensive, but they are effective enough to tilt the balance in tactical encounters. This is the paradox of *Atmanirbharta* as it is experienced on the frontlines. It is unquestionably the right path for India's sovereignty and strategic autonomy, but its gestation is long. Soldiers are being asked to carry the burden of this transition. They fight with mixed fleets, operating legacy imports alongside first-generation indigenous systems. They cope with the delays in spares, with the limited reliability of prototypes pushed into service, and with the knowledge that, across the LoC, the adversary often enjoys tactical parity through simple, mass-produced Chinese gear.

That is why the evolution of *Atmanirbharta* cannot be understood only in terms of policies and targets. It must also be seen as a process of adaptation at the tactical level. When indigenous systems arrive, they are often received with enthusiasm — not because they are perfect, but because they represent progress. Troops take pride in knowing that what they are using has been built in India. But alongside that pride comes the waiting— waiting for the system to mature, waiting for procurement cycles to translate into deliveries, waiting for the promise of self-reliance

to be felt in the trenches. From a tactical commander's perspective, this evolution must now enter a new phase. The first phase was about building institutions — DPSUs, DRDO, and policy frameworks. The second has been about 'creating private-sector pathways and indigenisation lists. The third phase, which must begin now, is about 'ensuring that policy ambition rapidly translates into tactical capability'. This requires not only reforms at the macro level but also flexible mechanisms at the operational level, thus allowing commanders to procure urgently required systems to bridge gaps. Without this, the moral ascendancy that Indian troops have painstakingly established on the LoC risks being eroded by adversaries who face no such restrictions.

Atmanirbharta is therefore both a journey of national pride and an operational necessity. Its evolution reflects India's growth as a power, but for those on the LoC, it remains a work in progress, one that must accelerate if our troops are to remain one step ahead of the adversary.

Positive Outcomes of Atmanirbharta

Even with all the shortcomings and delays, it would be unfair to say that *Atmanirbharta* has not delivered results. There are real and tangible outcomes that have made a difference, some at the strategic level and some felt directly by soldiers in the field. These successes are often islands in a larger sea of challenges, but they are important because they provide proof of concept. They remind us that persistence in indigenisation, even when uneven, can yield dividends.

The Tejas Light Combat Aircraft is perhaps the most visible example. To a soldier on the LoC, the development of a fighter aircraft may seem distant from his daily reality, but the symbolism is not lost. The fact that India, after decades of dependence on foreign suppliers, can field its own fighter jet instils pride across the ranks. The Tejas project was beset by endless delays, largely due to the lack of an indigenous aero-engine and gaps in advanced avionics. Yet, after years of perseverance, the aircraft achieved operational clearance and today stands as a symbol of Indian resilience in the face of adversity (HAL Report, 2021). The contracts for Tejas Mk1A variants are not just about aircraft; they represent a growing confidence that India can stand on its own feet. For the soldier, it is a reminder that even if progress is slow, it is possible.

If Tejas represents the virtue of patience, then BrahMos missile stands for the strength of partnership. Co-developed with Russia, BrahMos is not entirely indigenous, but it has been made Indian in the way it has been integrated, produced, and deployed. Its blistering speed and accuracy give commanders a reliable strike option that is feared by adversaries. More importantly, its export to the Philippines demonstrated that India can not only supply its own forces but also compete in the international market (Peri, D. 2022). For the troops, BrahMos is a reassurance that some systems in their arsenal are world-class and not dependent on others' goodwill.

Closer to the ground, the Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher has made a real difference. Developed by DRDO and produced jointly with Tata and L&T, Pinaka is not only an effective artillery system but also one that soldiers know has been designed and built at home. Its performance in operational deployments has given confidence to gunners, and its acceptance in export markets has further validated its reliability (DRDO, 2020). For soldiers who often see foreign systems dominate, Pinaka is an example of Indian ingenuity meeting battlefield requirements.

Artillery, long a neglected arm, has also seen revival through the Advanced Towed Artillery Gun System (ATAGS). Unlike older imports, ATAGS was developed with significant private sector involvement. The gun has shown excellent performance in trials, reaching ranges that rival the best in the world (ET, 2022). For the artillery regiments deployed in high-altitude and difficult terrain, knowing that such a weapon has been designed in India provides both pride and reassurance. It shows that self-reliance need not always be about compromise; rather, it can mean cutting-edge capability.

Rotary-wing platforms are another quiet but steady success. The Advanced Light Helicopter, Dhruv, designed and produced by HAL, has had its share of teething troubles, but it is now a proven platform serving across all three services. Its variants have been inducted in large numbers, and the Light Combat Helicopter is following. These aircrafts have been seen in operations along the LoC and in high-altitude areas, carrying troops, supplies, and sometimes casualties. For the men on the ground, they are visible symbols of Indian industry supporting Indian soldiers.

Perhaps the most encouraging trend of all has been the surge in defence exports. A decade ago, India's exports were negligible, barely crossing ₹1,500 crore annually. In 2023–24, they crossed ₹21,000 crore (PIB, 2024). The range is wide and includes patrol vessels, radars, artillery components, protective gear, and even aircraft parts. This surge demonstrates that Indian products are no longer confined to domestic markets but are competitive internationally. For soldiers, these matters, because if global buyers trust Indian equipments, it signals reliability.

None of these outcomes are perfect. Tejas still relies on imported engines, BrahMos is a joint venture, Pinaka took years to mature, and Dhruv's early variants were plagued by accidents. Yet, to dismiss them on those grounds would be to miss the larger point. Each of these successes adds a 'brick to the edifice' of self-reliance. Each shows that with persistence, policy support, and industrial focus, India can produce systems that are reliable, export-worthy, and respected. For the men deployed in field, these successes are not abstract. They are part of the larger narrative that tells them the nation is striving to support them better. When they see Pinaka in action, or when they know that BrahMos is in the arsenal, they feel the gap between rhetoric and reality narrowing. Positive outcomes like these provide hope—that the frustrations of today will eventually give way to an India that equips its soldiers with the best, made by its own hands.

Operation SINDOOR Lessons

Operation SINDOOR was, in many ways, a high point of recent years. For those who commanded troops in that operation, it was a moment of immense professional pride. The seamless coordination between formations, the way the men executed their tasks under pressure, and the jointness displayed between arms and services were remarkable. We had, for once, the sense of conducting operations as a single, integrated force rather than as isolated arms and services. That pride is genuine, and it is shared by every officer and soldier who participated. Yet, even as we celebrated the success of the operation, we could not escape the realities it exposed; realities that continue to ground us in the knowledge that our capability gaps remain stark, and in some areas, widening.

One such reality was artillery. No soldier forgets the sound of his own guns, and no adversary forgets their impact. In Operation SINDOOR, our gunners performed magnificently. They worked tirelessly, sustaining rates of fire that would test the limits of any artillery regiment. But the operation also reminded us of the asymmetry that persists when measured against the Pakistani arsenal. Across the Line of Control, the enemy has long benefited from a steady flow of Chinese-origin artillery systems, rocket launchers, and ammunition. Many of these may be crude compared to the sophisticated guns we aspire to field, but their sheer numbers and ready availability cannot be ignored.

Beyond artillery, SINDOOR brought out other realities. Our surveillance coverage, though improved, still left gaps. Indigenous UAVs gave us useful tactical feeds, but their endurance and resilience in contested conditions were limited. Meanwhile, we could see evidence of the adversary deploying commercial Chinese drones with regularity (ORF, 2021), using them for surveillance, targeting, and even simple harassment. This constant presence, though unsophisticated, created pressure on our troops and forced us to divert resources to counter them.

Electronic warfare too showed its unevenness. While our EW detachments made commendable efforts, some indigenous systems were less reliable under sustained operations, forcing us to rely on imported platforms to achieve decisive effects. In an age wherein control of the electromagnetic spectrum determines the tempo of battle, this partial reliance is a vulnerability that no commander can ignore. And yet, for all these challenges, what stood out in SINDOOR was the resilience of the men. They adapted, improvised, and delivered results despite these limitations. The sense of jointness — Army, Air Force, and Navy operating as a cohesive force — gave us confidence that the higher intent of theatreisation can work. But as tactical commanders, we are acutely aware that jointness at the operational level cannot fully compensate for shortages at the tactical level. If our gunners are short of shells, if our UAVs lack endurance, if our EW systems falter, then it is the troops at the front who absorb the consequences.

Thus, the true lesson of Operation SINDOOR is dual. On one hand, it demonstrated what we can achieve when we fight together, harnessing our professionalism and the limited indigenous capabilities that have matured. On the other hand, it underscored the urgency of filling gaps in

artillery sustainability, munitions production, and frontline equipment. For us on the LoC, these are not abstract discussions of policy — they are operational truths. We celebrate our success, but we also remain grounded in the knowledge that our adversary's access to cheap, plentiful Chinese equipment continues to erode the edge we have fought hard to establish (Wezeman, P.D., Gadon, J. and Wezeman, S.T. 2023).

Being Alive to Systemic Challenges

In contemporary times, no vision can be realised without confronting the systemic challenges that slows progress. These challenges do not exist in isolation— they are interconnected strands in a web of structural, financial, and technological constraints that have shaped India's defence industry for decades. To understand why self-reliance remains a long journey rather than a near-term achievement, it is essential to trace how these systemic issues manifest across the spectrum of research, production, procurement, and sustainment.

At the heart of the challenge lies technology. In recent years, India has achieved notable success in missiles, artillery, and certain rotary-wing platforms, but it continues to depend heavily on foreign suppliers for critical subsystems. Aero-engines are the most visible example (JDW, 2022). Despite the long-running Kaveri project, India is yet to produce a fighter-class engine of its own, forcing reliance on imported General Electric engines for the Tejas LCA. Propulsion limitations also extend to naval gas turbines, where India depends on overseas manufacturers. Similarly, in areas such as active electronically scanned array (AESA) radars, seekers for precision munitions, electronic warfare suites, and semiconductors, progress has been incremental but insufficient to ensure independence. These gaps highlight that without a dedicated and well-funded technology push, India's industrial base will remain reliant on imports for the very components that define battlefield superiority.

Linked to this is the issue of research and development. India spends less than 0.7% of its GDP on R&D— a figure that compares poorly with China (1.7%) or advanced economies such as the US and Israel (over 2.5%) {OECD, 2022}. Defence R&D is dominated by the Defence

Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), which has undoubtedly delivered in key areas — the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme, Pinaka, Akash, and more recently ATAGS stand testimony to its contributions. Yet, its laboratory-centric and bureaucratic structure often slows innovation. Unlike DARPA in the United States, which acts as a lean, mission-driven agency funding projects across universities, private firms, and start-ups, India's R&D ecosystem has remained overly centralised. Promising ideas outside the government structure frequently falls into the so-called “valley of death” between prototype and mass production.

Industrial organisation represents another major challenge. For decades, Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) and the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) dominated production. While this ensured some baseline capability, it also fostered a monopoly culture that stifled competition and innovation. The restructuring of the OFB into seven Defence Public Sector Enterprises in 2021 was meant to improve efficiency and accountability, and private sector giants such as Tata, L&T, and Bharat Forge have begun to make inroads. Yet, the playing field is still tilted in favour of state-run firms, which receives the lion's share of large contracts. This leaves private players, particularly MSMEs and start-ups, with uncertain demand and little long-term assurance. The result is an ecosystem that is fragmented, with uneven capacity across tiers (FICCI, 2021).

Procurement processes compound these difficulties. The Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020 introduced categories like Indigenous Design, Development and Manufacturing (IDDM) and sought to encourage faster decision-making. However, in practice, acquisition cycles often extend over 8–10 years, during which technology moves ahead and operational requirements evolve. Frequent changes to qualitative requirements (QRs), multiple rounds of trials, and cancellations discourage private investment and create cynicism among innovators. For the armed forces, this means new equipment often arrives late and is already facing obsolescence. For industry, it means sunk costs without guaranteed returns. With recent update of the procurement manuals in September 2025, hopefully such challenges will now be resolved and give a fillip to the desired ecosystem.

Financing is another hurdle. Defence manufacturing is capital-intensive, requiring large upfront investments in plant, machinery, and specialised skills. Yet, banks and financial institutions are reluctant to lend to firms in this sector because of long gestation periods and perceived policy uncertainty. MSMEs, which could be engines of innovation, face the hardest barriers, often struggling to survive between small orders and delayed payments. Initiatives such as the Defence Industrial Corridors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are steps in the right direction, but without large anchor projects and steady procurement pipelines, their potential remains underutilised.

Global dependencies also persist. Many critical raw materials, such as rare earths, specialised alloys, and high-grade electronics, are imported. These are sourced from global supply chains that are increasingly subject to geopolitical contestation. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, when supply chains across multiple sectors were disrupted, has made clear how vulnerable India remains in this regard. Without secure access to these materials, the aspiration of self-reliance risks being undermined at the most basic level.

Finally, the issue of stakeholder integration remains unresolved. In the most successful defence ecosystems, the military, industry, government, and academia operate in close coordination. In India, however, these linkages remain weak. Universities and research centres are seldom integrated into defence programmes in a systematic way, and the armed forces are often brought into the process late, rather than serving as co-designers of systems from the beginning. This results in equipment that sometimes struggles to meet operational needs or requires extensive modifications after induction.

These systemic challenges are not insurmountable. Indeed, the progress made in areas such as missile systems, rocket artillery, and rotary-wing aircraft shows that breakthroughs are possible. But unless technology gaps, R&D structures, industrial fragmentation, procurement inefficiencies, financing hurdles, and stakeholder integration are addressed as part of a coherent strategy, *Atmanirbharta* will remain uneven. The result will be 'islands of excellence surrounded by seas of dependency'. The long-term success of this roadmap depends not only on procurement at the user

end but also on how assured industry is of sustained demand. Defence manufacturing cannot scale up unless companies, both state-owned and private are confident of 10 to 15 year production runs. The Ministry of Defence must therefore commit to predictable procurement pipelines, which in turn will give industry the confidence to invest in infrastructure, skills, and R&D.

Self-reliance must therefore be seen not only as a policy objective but as a systemic transformation — one that builds resilient supply chains, integrates stakeholders, ensures predictable demand, and invests consistently in critical technologies. Only then can India move from episodic successes to a defence ecosystem that sustains itself over the long term and delivers what is most important: capability for the soldier in the field.

Roadmap to 2045

Any roadmap for *Atmanirbharta* must begin with the soldier. It is easy to speak in lofty terms of hypersonic glide vehicles or stealth bombers, but for the men on the LoC, the first question is simpler: do they have the tools they need to fight tonight? Like Maslow's Theory of Needs, where human requirements are built layer by layer — from survival to self-actualisation — the self-reliance roadmap must also climb step by step i.e. from the basics of survivability at the tactical level to the most advanced technological frontiers at the strategic level.

The foundation of the roadmap is to ensure that soldiers are never short of essential, reliable equipment. Night-vision devices, surveillance drones, counter-drone systems, secure communication sets, and sufficient stockpiles of artillery ammunition must be non-negotiable. These are not luxuries; they are the 'bread and butter' of fighting on the LoC. At present, the blanket ban on Chinese-origin equipment, while strategically justified, has left gaps in availability. The adversary across the LoC continues to field cheap Chinese drones and optics in large numbers.

To address this asymmetry, commanders at the tactical and operational level must be empowered to procure available commercial- off-the-shelf (COTS) equipment quickly, without being trapped in lengthy bureaucratic cycles. A calibrated compromise may be necessary in the interim: permitting the limited use of passive Chinese components that have no capacity to store or transmit data — such as certain optics or structural parts — while avoiding reliance on Chinese

systems that touch communications, navigation, or satellites. This approach would give soldiers the immediate tools they need while insulating critical networks from compromise.

Once the basics are secured, the next level is resilience. Operation SINDOOR showed how quickly precision-guided munitions and artillery stocks can be depleted. India must therefore build surge capacity in its munitions industry, with dual-use production lines that can scale up in wartime. Similarly, indigenous UAVs and electronic warfare systems must be made more reliable and durable for sustained operations. The roadmap must include a mechanism where spares and line-replaceable units are stocked adequately at forward locations, reducing downtime and ensuring that equipment remains serviceable in battle. The medium-term goal must be to bridge the gaps in critical technologies that define modern warfare. Aero-engines, advanced radars, seekers for guided munitions, and defence-grade semiconductors are all areas where India remains dependent (IDSA, 2020). These are not capabilities that can be improvised at the tactical level; they require long-term national investment. A dedicated propulsion mission, a defence-focused semiconductor initiative, and Centres of Excellence in artificial intelligence, avionics, and space systems must be sustained over the next decade and a half (MeitY, 2022). For the soldier, the translation of these investments will be seen in more reliable aircraft, longer-endurance UAVs, and weapons that strike with greater precision.

By 2045, India must aim not only to meet its own needs but to lead globally in select niches. Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs), hypersonic systems, space-based surveillance, and AI-enabled battle management will be the top tier of the self-reliance pyramid (RAND, 2021). These capabilities will ensure that India is not merely catching up but setting the standards of modern warfare. For the ground commander, the presence of such advanced systems is less immediate in daily operations but deeply reassuring, for it signals that the nation's sovereignty is secure and its deterrence unquestioned. The strength of this layered roadmap 'lies in its sequence'. Without meeting basic needs — night-fighting capability, drones, ammunition — the higher tiers have little meaning for the soldier at the forefront. But without investing in the higher tiers, India will never escape the cycle of dependency that has plagued its history. The roadmap must therefore allow for

a ‘dual-track approach: tactical empowerment in the present and strategic investment for the future’. Equally important is the need to ensure that tactical empowerment complements the larger process of theaterisation. When brigades and divisions across different theatres are equipped with common sets of surveillance drones, communications, and counter-drone systems, the task of joint operations becomes seamless. Interoperability at the tactical level thus becomes the bedrock upon which jointness at the operational level can flourish.

The journey to 2045 will be long, but the steps must begin today. Soldiers must not be left disadvantaged because policy has not kept pace with operational necessity. Tactical commanders should have the authority to procure what their men need in the short term, even if it means a carefully calibrated compromise on components, while national institutions work steadily towards full technological independence. By building self-reliance layer by layer, India can ensure that its soldiers fight tonight with confidence, while also securing the nation’s long-term sovereignty.

Decentralisation in Procurement Processes

The recent revision of the Defence Procurement Rules (DPR) by the Ministry of Defence is an encouraging step, especially in its emphasis on indigenisation and streamlined processes. Yet, from an operational perspective, the reforms have not gone far enough in democratising procurement powers down to the level where gaps are felt most acutely viz. the tactical edge.

The Army Commanders’ Special Financial Powers (ACSFPP) have long been a useful mechanism to enable urgent, localised procurement (PIB, 2021). This model, however, remains too centralised. To address real-time operational needs highlighted during Operation SINDOOR, similar provisions must be extended further down the chain, empowering divisional, brigade, and even battalion-level commanders with defined financial powers to procure equipment directly. Such de-centralisation would ensure that gaps in surveillance drones, optics, counter-drone systems, or communications are addressed immediately, rather than lost in the inertia of multi-year cycles. To prevent duplication and fragmentation, these purchases should not be left entirely *ad hoc*. A centralised vetting organisation could maintain a composite list of approved equipment types and suppliers for procurement commercially- off- the- shelf (COTS) {ORF, 2021}, ensuring

that once a category is cleared, all formations draw from the same pool. A digitised portal listing vetted COTS equipment— their costs, maintenance contracts, and availability of spares would greatly reduce delays. Such a platform would allow tactical commanders to make informed choices quickly, while ensuring transparency and oversight at higher headquarters. This would create commonality, simplify training, and establish streamlined repair and spare part mechanisms across the Army. Procurement reforms must also create structured feedback mechanisms, ensuring that the requirements and lessons emerging from the field formations (users) feed directly into the framing of GSQRs. Without this loop, there is a persistent mismatch between what industry develops and what soldiers require. In the interim, until Indian industry matures to deliver comparable systems, limited use of equipment with passive Chinese components — optics, batteries, structural parts with no capacity to store or transmit data — should be permitted. This pragmatic compromise would allow soldiers to bridge today's gaps while safeguarding against strategic vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

This essay began as an attempt to convey the realities faced by soldiers on the ground. What is in question, however, is whether the system, that equips them, is keeping pace with the challenges they confront daily. *Atmanirbharta* is the right path for India's long-term strategic autonomy, but for the soldier in the trench, the slow translation of policy into capability has immediate and dangerous consequences.

The most important recommendation emerging from this analysis is the urgent need to shorten the adoption cycle of *Atmanirbharta* provisions. Policies like DAP 2020, DPEPP 2020, and iDEX hold promise; the recent update to the Defence Procurement manual to fastrack, simplify and rationalise revenue procurement processes has addressed major issues, but they remain trapped in the slow-moving machinery of committees, trials, and layered approvals. For the soldier on the LoC, such delays translate into reduced capability in the here and now. The system must therefore create mechanisms for 'quicker adoption of proven indigenous systems' and 'faster integration of commercially available solutions' into the operational environment. Where capability gaps exist,

especially in ISR, electronic warfare, drones, and counter-drone systems, commanders at the operational and tactical level must be empowered to procure equipments through simplified, fast-track channels.

This is not to dilute the vision of self-reliance, but to recognise that wars are not fought in the future — they are fought with what is available today. Pakistan, supported by China, continues to field inexpensive yet effective systems that directly affects the balance at the tactical level. To maintain the hard-won moral ascendancy along the LoC, India must ensure that its troops are not disadvantaged by bureaucratic inertia. Bridging this asymmetry requires a dual-track approach—continue the long-term investments in indigenous capacity while creating flexible procurement windows that allow formations in the field to plug immediate gaps.

The men on the LoC will fight with what they are given, as they always have. But it is the duty of the system to ensure that what they are given is adequate, timely, and relevant. *Atmanirbharta* must not become a reason for vulnerability in the present, but rather a shield that strengthens both today's soldier and tomorrow's sovereignty. The leadership, both political and military, must act with urgency to balance vision with ground reality. Only then will the sacrifices of Operation SINDOOR translate into lasting strategic strength, and only then will *Atmanirbhara Bharat* move 'from aspiration to operational truth'.

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*India's Push For Self-Reliance and Its Impact on Military Capability:
Identifying Challenges in The System Post Operation Sindoor*

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About the Author

Brigadier Shubhankar Ghoshal, SM** got commissioned into 9 Sikh Light Regiment on 11 December 1999 and commanded 14 Sikh Light Regiment in North Sikkim in Eastern Sector & in Kanpur. The Officer is an alumnus of National Defence Academy and prestigious Defence Services Staff College. He has tenanted various staff and instructional appts to include Instructor Class B at Inf School, Mhow, Bn Cdr in OTA Gaya, GSO -1 MO- 8A, DGMO Dte and Col PS in PS-2, IHQ of MoD (Army). He has also served in UN mission as MILOB in Congo. He is currently commanding 80 Inf Bde on the Line of Control wef 18 June 25.



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