

**NAVIGATING THE PROPRIETARY
AND OPEN STANDARDS DIVIDE:**

INDIA'S DEFENCE PROCUREMENT DILEMMA



Clockwise: Amit Kapoor & Jae Yu

THE STRATEGIC contours of international defence procurement shape national security policies and geopolitical alliances. India, in this global narrative, confronts a critical juncture: choosing between proprietary and open standards in its defence procurement. This decision transcends technology, embodying strategic intent, economic foresight, and geopolitical acumen. This article unfolds the layers of India's defence procurement strategies, examining the implications of proprietary versus open standards within the canvas of historical ties, current global shifts, and the future trajectory of national security.



Tracing back to the 1950s, India's defence procurement trajectory has been marked by its alignment with the Soviet Union, a relationship cemented by the procurement of proprietary Soviet military hardware. This choice, steeped in the political and strategic calculus of the Cold War, established a pattern of reliance that has endured for decades. Recent initiatives, notably the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative with the United States, have signaled a strategic pivot, initiating a nuanced shift towards a diverse military inventory and the adoption of Western defence technologies. The recent conflict in Ukraine, however has laid bare the vulnerabilities of a monolithic reliance on Russian military equipment, prompting nations, including India, to reassess their defence procurement strategies. These events, alongside the global supply chain disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, have catalysed a strategic shift towards a more diversified and technologically robust procurement approach. India's engagements with Western defence corporations, such as Lockheed Martin, underscore a growing preference for interoperability and innovation in military technology.

India's defence procurement decisions are inextricably linked to its foreign policy objectives. The move from Russian proprietary systems to a more eclectic mix that includes American and French technologies signals a recalibrated approach to balance

traditional partnerships and foster new alliances. This reorientation is particularly poignant against the backdrop of regional power dynamics, where India's strategic alliances are pivotal in its diplomatic and security policies. The fabric of South Asian geopolitics is woven with intricate alliances and long-standing tensions. India's defence procurement choices are strategic levers that influence this regional tapestry. The evolving defence relationships with Western nations are not mere transactions but reflect a calculated response to the strategic posturing of adversaries and the intent to bolster India's own geopolitical stance. India's geopolitical environment is characterised by its strategic location, sharing borders with several countries, including Pakistan and China. The long-standing territorial disputes with these neighbours have necessitated a robust defence posture for India, compelling it to continuously upgrade its military capabilities.

Defence procurement is a conduit for economic interdependence, with deals often fostering deep-rooted economic connections that transcend the immediate military hardware transactions. These interdependencies, characteris-

tic of India's historical defence ties with Russia, have provided comprehensive support packages that embed suppliers within the defence frameworks of purchasing nations. As India shifts towards Western suppliers, these economic ties assume new forms, influencing the strategic and economic contours of the involved countries.

The strategic debate at the heart of India's defence procurement strategy is the choice between proprietary and open standards. Proprietary systems offer a degree of control and integrated solutions but often at a significant cost: vendor lock-in and a curtailment of competition. Open standards, on the other hand, foster a vibrant ecosystem of interoperability and innovation. They are emblematic of a strategic desire for agility and

independence in military capabilities.

In the defence sector, proprietary systems from varied national suppliers can lead to complex integration challenges, limiting the ability of the armed forces to operate seamlessly across platforms and allies. Open standards offer a resolution to these challenges, ensuring that equipment from different sources can communicate and function together effectively, enhancing operational readiness and strategic flexibility. This choice is critical for India as it seeks to balance its traditional procurement practices with the need for modernisation and alignment with global defence standards.

India's defence strategy has historically leaned towards proprietary systems, primarily due to their immediate technological superiority and the assur-

ance of support from established defence partners. This reliance is evident in the procurement of high-profile platforms and systems, such as fighter aircraft, submarines, and missile defence systems, from countries like Russia, the United States and France. While these procurements have bolstered India's defence capabilities, they have also highlighted the vulnerabilities associated with proprietary dependencies, including issues related to cost, sovereignty, and supply chain risks. In response to these challenges, there has been a growing emphasis on diversifying India's defence procurement strategy to include open standards. The government's 'Make in India' initiative, aimed at boosting domestic manufacturing, underscores this shift by encouraging the development and integration of indigenous defence technologies. This strategic pivot is not only about reducing foreign dependency but also about fostering innovation within the country's defence sector. By leveraging open standards, India aims to build a robust ecosystem that can produce interoperable and cost-effective solutions, thereby enhancing its strategic autonomy and technological self-reliance.

India's journey through the strategic maze of defence procurement is a testament to the country's evolving stance in the global order. Each decision in the procurement space is a calculated move that resonates with international observers, influencing the regional balance of power and the broader defence industry. The transition towards a preference for open standards in defence procurement is not merely a technological pivot but a strategic reorientation that will define India's military effectiveness, its autonomy in defence strategy, and its global standing. As India manoeuvres this path, its choices will undeniably shape the future narrative of regional security and international defence cooperation. **BW**

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