

SP's



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**FROM AIR SUPERIORITY
TO INDUSTRIAL CAPACITY**
— AIR CHIEF MARSHAL
V.R. CHAUDHARI (RETD),
FORMER CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF,
INDIAN AIR FORCE

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A FAMILY OF MISSIONS

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MILITARY HELICOPTER FLEET

CIVIL
BEHIND THE RISE IN AIRLINE
DISRUPTION ACROSS INDIA

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ROTORS THAT REFUSE TO RETIRE

AFTER DECADES OF OPERATIONAL SERVICE ACROSS INDIA'S MOST DEMANDING THEATRES, REPLACING THE AGEING CHEETAH AND CHETAK HELICOPTER FLEETS HAS BECOME ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST URGENT MILITARY AVIATION PRIORITIES

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The Cheetah and Chetak helicopters have served India with distinction for over six decades. The need for their replacement has long been acknowledged but what has been lacking is the pace of modernisation that commensurate with operational requirements.

(Cover Photo: Indian Air Force)

COVER DESIGN BY: SP's Team



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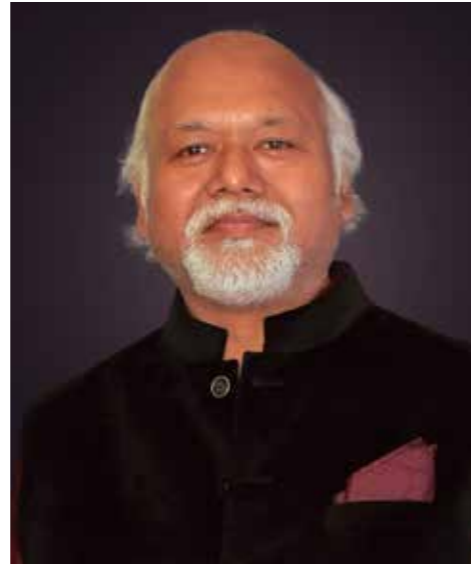
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The widening gap between the capabilities of the ageing Cheetah and Chetak Helicopter fleets in the Indian Armed Forces and the operational demands placed upon them is no longer a matter of debate. What remains unresolved is the disconnect between strategic necessity and acquisition timelines. The question is not whether these helicopters should be replaced, but whether India's defence procurement system can move with the urgency that operational realities demand.



IN A RECENT MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENT, DEFENCE SECRETARY Rajesh Kumar Singh has assumed additional charge as Chairman of DRDO, placing India's premier defence research organisation under the leadership of the government's top defence bureaucrat. Manish Kumar Jha reports on the sector's expectations surrounding his tenure, including advancing self-reliance through indigenous design, strengthening collaboration with private industry, faster decision-making and defence modernisation.

We are pleased to have former CAS Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari (Retd) give us his analyses of the air campaigns during the recent US-Iran conflict. He argues that Iran's resilience reflected deliberate strategy rather than military collapse, employing measured escalation, inventory management, and mass-produced drones and missiles to sustain pressure on key US assets. ACM Chaudhari highlights the growing importance of industrial capacity, war economies, and the ability to replenish losses in modern warfare. Also, for India, the conflict offers important lessons on airbase hardening, force resilience, munitions stockpiling, drone warfare, and strengthening the defence industrial base to sustain prolonged high-intensity operations.

On business aviation, firstly we have Rohit Goel examine how Dassault Aviation has developed the Falcon family around a philosophy of mission effectiveness and operational utility rather than simply greater range or larger cabins. Drawing on technologies derived from the company's long aviation heritage, the Falcon portfolio spans a wide range of mission profiles while emphasising airport accessibility, operational flexibility, passenger comfort, and sustainability.

Then, Julian Dsouza, Adani Group Head-Aviation writes that business aviation enables Corporates to operate across India's geographically dispersed industrial hinterland. Using the Adani Group as a case study, he demonstrates how aviation-first deployment across ports, power plants and mining clusters drives economic activation, attracts FDI and builds high-value jobs.

Helicopter modernisation remains a critical issue for the Indian Armed Forces. Rohit Goel examines the long-delayed replacement of the ageing Cheetah and Chetak fleets, which have served for more than six decades in demanding operational environments. Rising maintenance burdens, declining serviceability, and safety concerns have made replacement increasingly urgent. In another related feature, Rohit Goel explores India's broader rotary-wing transformation. Key programmes include the induction of 156 indigenous Prachand Light Combat Helicopters, MH-60R Seahawk maritime helicopters, the forthcoming Naval Utility Helicopter programme, upgrades to the Mi-17V5 fleet, and the long-term Indian Multi-Role Helicopter programme. Together, these initiatives reflect India's drive towards self-reliance, operational resilience, and enhanced combat capability across diverse operational environments.

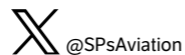
The recent instability in West Asia, coupled with the continued closure of Pakistani airspace, has disrupted airline operations across India. Charishma Chowdary analyses how rerouting has increased flight times, fuel consumption, and operating costs, placing pressure on carriers such as Air India and IndiGo. The resulting capacity constraints have affected schedules and route networks. While government intervention has provided temporary relief, the article highlights how geopolitical developments are increasingly shaping airline economics, network planning, and passenger experiences in India's rapidly growing aviation market.

All this and more in this issue of *SP's Aviation*. Welcome aboard and we wish you safe landings!


JAYANT BARANWAL
 PUBLISHER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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DEFENCE SECRETARY RAJESH KUMAR SINGH HAS ASSUMED THE ADDITIONAL CHARGE OF CHAIRMAN OF THE DEFENCE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION (DRDO)

DEFENCE SECRETARY RAJESH KUMAR SINGH TAKES ADDITIONAL CHARGE OF DRDO CHAIRMAN, FACES REFORM AGENDA

Rajesh Kumar Singh's appointment comes at a crucial juncture for India's defence sector. With rising security challenges and growing emphasis on indigenous military capability, the government is looking to transform DRDO into a more agile and outcome-oriented institution.

By MANISH KUMAR JHA

PHOTOGRAPHS: PIB

FOLLOWING THE RETIREMENT OF SAMIR V. KAMAT, DEFENCE Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh has assumed the additional charge of Chairman of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), placing one of the country's most critical defence technology institutions under the stewardship of the government's top defence bureaucrat at a time when India is seeking to accelerate military modernisation and strengthen indigenous capabilities.

The move comes amid growing expectations that DRDO will play a central role in advancing India's technological edge in emerging domains of warfare. It primarily aims to reduce dependence on foreign technology and imports.

Singh's appointment is being viewed as an opportunity to push through long-pending reforms within the defence research ecosystem. As Defence Secretary, he has already been closely involved in policy formulation, defence procurement and indigenous manufacturing initiatives.

His dual role is expected to facilitate greater coordination between the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and DRDO, potentially speeding up decision-making and project execution, which are often seen as major obstacles.

Industry experts and defence planners have identified four key areas where the new leadership is expected to focus. The first is a comprehensive technology overhaul. As military competition increasingly shifts towards artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber warfare and space-based capabilities, DRDO is expected to reorient a larger share of its resources towards next-generation technologies. This includes the development of artificial intelligence (AI)-based combat systems, advanced unmanned platforms, quantum technologies, and space-based Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets.

While DRDO has achieved notable successes in missile systems, radar technologies and strategic programmes, analysts argue that future conflicts will be shaped by network-centric warfare and autonomous systems, areas where India must accelerate capability development.

The second priority is improving procurement efficiency and delivery timelines. Delays in defence projects have long been a concern for the armed forces. Expectations are growing that the organisation will work closely with the MoD to streamline research, testing and acquisition processes.

A major review of the Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) is also anticipated, with an emphasis on reducing process and approvals and ensuring that technological solutions reach the services faster. The armed forces have repeatedly highlighted the need for shorter development cycles to keep pace with rapidly evolving threats and technologies.



Defence Secretary's dual role is expected to facilitate greater coordination between the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and DRDO, potentially speeding up decision-making and project execution. A major review of the Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) is also anticipated.

Self-reliance under the government's Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliance India) initiative is expected to form the third pillar of the reform agenda. Defence planners also argue that merely assembling foreign-origin systems under licence is insufficient for long-term strategic autonomy.

The focus is likely to shift towards securing complete domestic intellectual property rights and indigenous design capabilities across major defence platforms. Such an approach would allow India to upgrade, export and sustain military systems without dependence on foreign vendors or technology providers.

It is important to highlight that true technological sovereignty can only be achieved when critical technologies are designed and controlled within the country rather than acquired through technology transfer agreements.

The fourth challenge before the new DRDO leadership is strengthening collaboration with private industry, startups, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and academic institutions.

Although DRDO has increasingly partnered with private companies in recent years, experts say significant gaps remain between laboratory research and large-scale production.

Additionally, greater integration with the private sector is expected to improve manufacturing efficiency, shorten development timelines and promote innovation.

Industry leaders have long advocated a model in which DRDO focuses on advanced research and technology development while private firms drive production, commercialisation and export opportunities.

Singh's appointment comes at a crucial juncture for India's defence sector. With rising security challenges and growing emphasis on indigenous military capability, the government is looking to transform DRDO from a research-driven organisation into a more agile and outcome-oriented institution capable of delivering cutting-edge technologies to the armed forces.

The defence secretary, in his role as interim chairman, is tasked with translating policy intent into measurable outcomes that will be closely watched by the military, industry and the strategic community alike.

The success of DRDO's next phase may ultimately determine how quickly India can achieve its ambition of defence indigenisation across the major platforms and systems. **SP**

Manish Kumar Jha is a Consulting & Contributing Editor for SP's Aviation, SP's Land Forces and SP's Naval Forces and a security expert. He writes on national security, military technology, strategic affairs & policies.



THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL DEPLOYED A WIDE RANGE OF AIR POWER TO ACHIEVE AIR SUPERIORITY OVER THE SKIES OF IRAN



FROM AIR SUPERIORITY TO INDUSTRIAL CAPACITY

By AIR CHIEF MARSHAL V.R. CHAUDHARI (RETD),
FORMER CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF, INDIAN AIR FORCE

The strategic lessons emerging from the recent US-Iran war in the Middle East reveal how air power, force generation and industrial capacity are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, reshaping the conduct and economics of modern warfare

THE FRAGILE CEASEFIRE IN THE US/ISRAEL-IRAN WAR HAS LED to much speculation on what the contours of conflict would look like if the ceasefire is violated. While analysts are still grappling with explanations for Iran's stout defence against the might of the United States, it may be opportune to study the aspects of air power in the campaign.

THE DANGER OF PREMATURE CONCLUSIONS

Ten days into the air campaign, General Dan Caine, chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that Iranian launches of "one-way attack drones have decreased 83 per cent since the beginning of the operation." This figure reflects a decline in observed launch rate — more an indicator of tactics than of stockpiles. Such announcements risk creating a misleading picture of how much of the threat has actually been eliminated, and can put war fighters at risk.

Functional damage assessment estimates how much of a target's operational capability has survived after a strike, while

target-system damage assessment evaluates whether the offensive campaign is degrading the adversary's ability to fight. This is achieved via an intensive data-crunching process that may take weeks, if not months. The biggest pitfall of drawing lessons too early from any conflict is making conclusive arguments in the absence of target-system level assessments.

IRAN'S STRATEGY OF ATTRITION AND INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

The euphoria over decimating Iran's war-waging capacity was short-lived when Iranian drones and missiles struck Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, destroying an E-3 Sentry and damaging KC-135 tankers — not for the first time. Earlier in March, an Iranian attack had reportedly damaged at least five KC-135 tankers at the same base.

The pause in Iranian counter-attacks had given rise to speculation that their forces were decimated. It could instead have been a tactical recalibration — using the time to learn, adapt, and refine strategy. It could also have been deliberate stockpiling for larger, coordinated attacks later, a pattern not unlike Russian strikes in Ukraine. Or Iran simply realised that a lower but sustained launch rate is sufficient to maintain coercive pressure on Gulf States while conserving weapons for a protracted conflict. A strategy of attrition does not require maximum effort every day. Iran had, after all, kept the then fourth-largest army at bay for over eight years during the Iran-Iraq War — fighting through sustained but measured offensives that depleted Iraqi forces while preserving their own assets judiciously.

Observing the pattern of Iranian strikes over the first ten days, one notices a measured escalatory sequence: first military installations, then logistics hubs and communications nodes, and finally energy infrastructure. Each target system served a distinct coercive purpose. This kind of target sequencing is not characteristic of a force running low on munitions — it is consistent with deliberate inventory management.

DRONES, INDUSTRIAL CAPACITY, AND THE CHANGING LOGIC OF AIR CAMPAIGNS

The US CJCS's statement needs careful analysis. The Shahed-136, Iran's primary drone weapon, requires no dedicated launch facility. It launches from an angled rail mounted on a pickup truck that can quickly relocate, minimising exposure to counter-strike. Airstrikes targeting Houthi missile and drone launch sites had previously failed to destroy the launchers precisely because they were dispersed, mobile, and difficult to locate. Iran's dispersed drone production has similarly frustrated efforts to strike the full supply chain. Ballistic missiles — relying on large vehicles, fixed infrastructure, and longer preparation times — are easier to find, fix, and target. In all probability, the 83 per cent figure for "one-way drones", likely bundled SSM capabilities into that count.

Iran has launched around 2,000 Shahed drones from a stock of over 10,000. This raises a critical question: how long can regional air defences sustain the expenditure of interceptors required to defeat continuous attacks? In the absence of layered air defences at US bases in the Middle East, American forces appear to have focused on the other side of the equation — degrading Iran's ability to produce weapons and generate mass.

An unambiguous objective of Operation Epic Fury has been degrading not just Iran's long-range weapons, but also its ability to replenish them. The targeting of Iran's military-industrial complex is reminiscent of World War II strategic bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan — a scale of industrial tar-

geting largely unseen in the decades since. Over the last four to five decades, US airpower has increasingly employed precision-guided munitions against fielded forces, command-and-control systems, and directly supporting infrastructure. Iran's reliance on easy-to-produce, one-way attack drones has complicated this calculus — by repopulating the battlefield quickly, Iran has created more targets that US forces must find, track, and destroy, thereby increasing the time and effort required to achieve decisive effects. While emerging counter-drone technologies and low-cost interceptors may counter salvos or swarms of drones, such systems would be required in huge quantities, particularly if multiple interceptors are needed to defeat continuous waves of attacks during protracted conflicts.

TARGETING THE ENABLERS OF AIR POWER

In this conflict, asymmetric force levels compelled Iran to devise its counter-air campaign innovatively. Iran systematically targeted the enablers of American airpower — radar and communication infrastructure, aerial refuelling tankers, and Airborne Warning and Control Systems — located across US bases in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. By degrading these enablers, Iran could continue its drone and missile attacks with the same goal as traditional counter-air: to weaken the enemy's ability to launch aerial attacks. When viewed against air power doctrines, Iran's tactics relied on cheap drones and missiles rather than fighters and bombers to attain some level of 'air denial' to deny control of the air to the US forces. In an era where concealing high-value assets has become increasingly difficult due to persistent surveillance, long-range precision strikes has resulted in attrition that can exhaust defences. In more ways than one, they exposed the vulnerabilities of US airpower operating in forward locations, being under repeated attacks.

Giulio Douhet had foretold that "it is easier and more effective to destroy the enemy's aerial power by destroying his nests and eggs on the ground than to hunt his flying birds in the air." Iran's strategy has followed precisely this principle, but through asymmetric means — targeting refuelling aircraft, AWACS, satellite communications terminals, early warning radars, and even damaging the primary sensor of the THAAD battery at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base. Degrading these systems has created coverage gaps and weakened the very defences designed to stop Iran's own strikes. The targeting of tankers has forced a dilemma: forward-deploy them and risk further damage, or pull them back and reduce strike sorties and time on station.

LESSONS FOR FUTURE WARS: MASS, RESILIENCE, AND INDUSTRIAL CAPACITY

Operation Epic Fury has demonstrated that to address Iran's advantage in mass production and employment of drones, high-end offensive and defensive munitions alone are not sufficient. This has resulted in the resolve to choke force generation at its source — a doctrinal shift away from targeting deployed forces, toward attacking production facilities persistently, something the US military has not pursued at scale since World War II.

While Op Epic Fury may have been a relatively low-threat operation against Iran, the same template cannot be applied against a peer adversary. Attacking industrial sites on the territory of a nuclear-armed adversary would require sufficient air superiority and could be highly escalatory. Deep strikes against industrial facilities would require very long-range precision weapons, or fifth-generation fighters employing standoff weapons, supported by extensive SEAD/DEAD operations.



IRAN EFFECTIVELY USED TACTICAL MEASURES OF MISSILES AND INEXPENSIVE DRONES IN THEIR COUNTER ATTACKS ON US ASSETS IN THE REGION; (INSET) IRAN'S SHAHED-136 DRONE, USED EXTENSIVELY IN THE WAR AGAINST THE US AND ISRAEL

The lessons for us are direct and unambiguous. Our armed forces need more munitions, of more types, to compete with rivals that can build masses of drones and missiles. The most important takeaway is the vulnerability of forward airbases, particularly those that do not provide sanctuary to high-value assets. Hardening of airbase infrastructure is an investment that cannot be wished away. Dispersal, while a sound doctrinal precept, has practical limits — it requires pre-positioned equipment, trained personnel, and logistics infrastructure that takes years to build.

The return of mass is the next critical lesson. The flawed belief that quantity can be traded for quality has depleted our fighter strength and air defence systems. Sustained salvos can exhaust missile defences and reduce the capacity to absorb losses. What Iran has executed with ballistic missiles and cheap drones, China could execute at a far greater scale and sophistication. Our force structure and industrial base were built for a different era. The time for drastic reform is now.

The fragility of our system — with a handful of aging tankers and Airborne Warning and Control Systems — is not easily comprehended. Uncrewed platforms are undoubtedly cheaper and could provide the mass and resilience necessary, but cannot yet fulfil support roles like aerial refuelling or airborne command-and-control. The Indian Air Force's pursuit of such capabilities through initiatives like the Mehar Baba Competition — this edition themed on collaborative drone-based surveillance radars — points in the right direction, but must be backed by serious industrial investment.

THE RETURN OF THE WAR ECONOMY

We need to go beyond paper plans and incentivise invest-

ments in the industrial base to increase surge and reserve production capacity. The private sector will always prioritise profit and be wary of investing in military goods. The government must create market incentives vital to building and maintaining a defence industrial base capable of supporting military requirements for a protracted conflict. A basic estimate of military needs over the duration of a conflict is vital for contemporary industrial planning — and developing these plans will require a new generation of thinkers, planners, and analysts across the armed forces and industry.

While we are on track to field new platforms and weapons over the next decade — from maneuverable hypersonic weapons to next-generation stealthy, long-range, unmanned aircraft — this calls for parallel developments in doctrine, training, and operational concepts. Planners must consider how increased attrition and material shortages could affect concepts of operations, and how force generation can be built around modularity and flexibility to adapt to unforeseen countermeasures.

The ongoing conflict has highlighted that warfare has come full circle — campaigns now seek to degrade an adversary's ability to maintain their war economy and supply their military forces. The efforts to disrupt Iranian supply lines through economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, maritime interdiction, and strikes against military-industrial facilities have created a new normal. Military planners must now consider various methods of impeding adversary war production over the duration of a protracted conflict. **SP**

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DASSAULT HAS DEVELOPED A CAREFULLY STRUCTURED PORTFOLIO OF THE FALCON SERIES IN WHICH EVERY AIRCRAFT OCCUPIES A CLEARLY DEFINED POSITION. FALCON 10X (SHOWN HERE) IS THEIR LATEST, TOP-OF-THE-LINE, FUTURE OF BUSINESS AIRCRAFT.

THE FALCON ARCHITECTURE - A FAMILY OF MISSIONS

Six aircraft, six missions, one idea - Dassault has built the Falcon family to bring the world within your reach

By ROHIT GOEL

IN BUSINESS AVIATION, RANGE FIGURES AND CABIN dimensions often dominate conversations. Yet the true measure of a business aircraft lies not merely in how far it can fly, but in how effectively it enables its passengers to conduct business. The ability to reach airports closer to final destinations, operate from shorter runways, minimise travel time and deliver passengers in comfort can ultimately prove more valuable than adding a few hundred nautical miles of range.

This philosophy sits at the heart of the Falcon family from Dassault Aviation. Over decades, the French manufacturer has carved out a distinctive position in the business aviation sector by leveraging technologies and design principles developed through its military aviation heritage. The result is a family of aircraft that prioritises operational flexibility, aerodynamic efficiency and advanced flight-control technologies alongside luxury and long-range capability.

PHOTOGRAPHS: DASSAULT AVIATION

10X UNVEILING
March 10, 2026
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Falcon 10X

Rather than pursuing a one-size-fits-all approach, Dassault has developed a carefully structured portfolio in which every aircraft occupies a clearly defined position. From the efficient and versatile Falcon 2000LXS to the newly unveiled Falcon 10X flagship, each model has been engineered around the specific needs of a target customer base. Together, they form one of the industry's most coherent product strategies, where technical capability and market positioning are closely aligned.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE FALCON BRAND

The defining characteristic of the Falcon family is its ability to combine long-range performance with access to airports that would otherwise be unavailable to aircraft of similar size and capability. This is achieved through advanced aerodynamics, sophisticated wing design and digital flight-control systems derived from technologies developed for Dassault's combat aircraft programmes.

The company's approach recognises a simple reality of business aviation. Travellers rarely measure the success of a journey by cruise speed alone. What matters is the total travel experience, from departure point to final destination. If an aircraft can access a smaller airport closer to a city centre, avoid a fuel stop or operate efficiently from challenging environments, it creates value that goes beyond performance figures in a sales brochure.

This philosophy is evident throughout the Falcon family, with each aircraft delivering a carefully balanced combination of range, efficiency, comfort and operational flexibility — and, increasingly, a clear position on sustainability. As scrutiny of aviation's environmental footprint intensifies, Dassault has steadily built Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) compatibility into its newer engine programmes, a thread that runs from the 6X's PW812D through to the 10X's Pearl 10X.

FALCON 2000LXS: THE PRACTICAL BUSINESS TOOL

Within the Falcon range, the Falcon 2000LXS serves as the entry point into large-cabin business aviation. Yet describing it simply as an entry-level product would significantly underestimate its importance.

The aircraft occupies a strategic position in the market by targeting operators who require substantial cabin space and transcontinental capability without the acquisition and operating costs associated with ultra-long-range platforms. For corporate flight departments, charter operators and owner-pilots, it represents a highly practical solution capable of handling the vast majority of business aviation missions.

Its appeal lies in the balance it strikes between capability and efficiency. With a range of approximately 4,000 nautical miles, the aircraft can connect major business centres across



(TOP) FALCON 2000LXS OCCUPIES A STRATEGIC POSITION IN THE MARKET BY TARGETING OPERATORS WHO REQUIRE SUBSTANTIAL CABIN SPACE AND TRANSCONTINENTAL CAPABILITY; (ABOVE) FALCON 900LX CONTINUES TO OFFER A DISTINCTIVE THREE-ENGINE CONFIGURATION, MAKING THE TRIJET A DELIBERATE PART OF DASSAULT'S CURRENT LINEUP.

continents while maintaining operating economics that remain attractive in an increasingly cost-conscious environment. At the same time, the aircraft's advanced wing design, featuring full-length inboard slats that work in concert with its outboard slats, provides exceptional low-speed performance and short-field capability — reducing landing distance to as little as 2,260 feet at typical landing weight and opening up hundreds of airports that would otherwise be off-limits to jets of this size.

This operational flexibility allows the Falcon 2000LXS to access airports that can significantly reduce ground travel times for passengers. For many operators, this capability is more valuable than carrying additional fuel for missions they rarely fly. In that sense, the aircraft embodies the core Falcon philosophy: delivering practical business utility rather than pursuing performance figures for their own sake.



(TOP) FALCON 6X FEATURES THE WIDEST AND TALLEST CABIN OF ANY PURPOSE-BUILT BUSINESS JET CURRENTLY IN PRODUCTION IN ITS SEGMENT; (ABOVE) FALCON 8X CLEARLY DEMONSTRATES DASSAULT'S DESIGN PHILOSOPHY COMBINING RANGE WITH OPERATIONAL FLEXIBILITY THAT REMAINS DIFFICULT TO MATCH.

FALCON 900LX: THE ENDURING LOGIC OF THE TRIJET

Few aircraft illustrate Dassault's willingness to challenge conventional industry thinking more effectively than the Falcon 900LX.

At a time when the market has largely standardised around twin-engine designs, the Falcon 900LX continues to offer a distinctive three-engine configuration — a layout it shares with the larger Falcon 8X, making the trijet a deliberate and enduring thread within Dassault's current lineup rather than a single legacy holdover. While unconventional by modern standards, the architecture remains highly relevant for a specific segment of customers.

The aircraft appeals particularly to government operators, heads-of-state fleets and organisations that place a premium on redundancy, operational resilience and flexibility. The third

engine provides additional performance margins, particularly when operating from challenging airports or in demanding environmental conditions, and contributes to the aircraft's reputation for reliability and dispatch dependability.

With a range of approximately 4,750 nautical miles and high-Mach blended wing-lets that improve fuel efficiency, the Falcon 900LX is not simply a redundancy play. Its typical approach speed of around 111 knots, is a direct product of the trijet's low-speed handling characteristics, and it is this combination of resilience and short-field manners that keeps the aircraft relevant to operators flying into demanding airports such as London City or high-elevation strips.

The Falcon 900LX occupies a niche that Dassault understands exceptionally well. Rather than competing directly on maximum range or cabin size, it serves operators whose missions demand a combination of flexibility, confidence and versatility. The aircraft's continued presence within the Falcon portfolio — as the trijet architecture's primary standard-bearer following the retirement of the Falcon 7X from production — demonstrates that product longevity often stems from addressing genuine customer needs rather than following broader market trends.

FALCON 6X: THE NEW BENCHMARK FOR CABIN EXPERIENCE

If the Falcon 2000LXS represents efficiency and the Falcon 900LX represents versatility, the Falcon 6X is arguably the embodiment of modern passenger expectations.

Business aviation has evolved significantly over the past decade. Travellers increasingly expect aircraft cabins to function as offices, conference rooms and private living spaces. Productivity, wellness and comfort have become as important as performance. The Falcon 6X was designed with these priorities firmly in mind.

Featuring the widest and tallest cabin of any purpose-built business jet currently in production in its segment, the aircraft represents a significant step forward in passenger experience. The spacious interior provides an environment designed to reduce fatigue during long journeys while enhancing productivity and comfort.

Yet the Falcon 6X is far more than a large cabin wrapped around a long-range airframe. The aircraft combines its passenger-focused design with a maximum range of approximately 5,500 nautical miles at Mach 0.80, or 5,100 nautical miles when cruising at the faster Mach 0.85, and a maximum operating speed of Mach 0.90. Advanced avionics, digital flight controls and the FalconEye Combined Vision System contribute to operational efficiency while enhancing situational awareness and safety — and, in practical terms, extend the aircraft's reach into airports such as London City and Lugano, where low-visibility approaches would otherwise restrict

access. The PW812D engines that power the 6X are also certified to operate on Sustainable Aviation Fuel blends, reflecting Dassault's broader move toward lower-emission powerplants across the range.

The aircraft occupies a strategically important position within the Falcon family. It is aimed at customers who require genuine intercontinental capability but may not necessarily need the extreme range of flagship aircraft. In doing so, it captures a significant segment of the market where comfort, flexibility and efficiency intersect.

FALCON 8X: THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF FALCON CAPABILITY

Among current production Falcons, the Falcon 8X most clearly demonstrates the full breadth of Dassault's design philosophy.

The aircraft combines a range of approximately 6,450 nautical miles with operational flexibility that remains difficult to match. It can undertake true intercontinental missions while maintaining the ability to access airports that many aircraft in its category cannot serve.

This capability stems from a combination of advanced aerodynamics, sophisticated flight-control technologies and Dassault's long-standing emphasis on low-speed performance. Like the Falcon 900LX, the 8X retains a three-engine configuration — in this case three Pratt & Whitney Canada PW307D turbofans — underscoring that the trijet is not a legacy compromise within Dassault's design philosophy but a deliberate architectural choice carried through to its longest-range production aircraft. The result is an aircraft capable of connecting global business centres while simultaneously offering access to airports located closer to final destinations.

For multinational corporations, government operators and ultra-high-net-worth individuals, this capability translates directly into time savings. A long-range aircraft capable of operating into more restrictive airports can reduce overall travel time even if its competitors offer marginally greater range.

The Falcon 8X also serves as a showcase for Dassault's military heritage. Its digital fly-by-wire flight-control system, derived from technologies developed for the Rafale combat aircraft, enhances safety, handling characteristics and passenger comfort while reducing pilot workload. The aircraft demonstrates how technologies originally developed for military applications can generate tangible benefits in the civil aviation sector.

FALCON 10X: DEFINING THE NEXT GENERATION

Set to become the flagship of the Falcon family, the Falcon 10X represents Dassault's vision for the future of business aviation — and, with its formal unveiling in Bordeaux-Mérignac in March 2026 and entry into its flight-testing phase, that vision has now moved from concept to hardware.

The aircraft has been conceived for a market increasingly dominated by customers who view business jets as extensions of their homes and offices. These travellers require exceptional range, expansive living spaces and the latest technological

innovations, but they are unwilling to compromise on operational flexibility.

With a maximum range of 7,500 nautical miles, a maximum operating speed of Mach 0.925 and what is expected to be the largest cabin in the purpose-built business jet sector — measuring 9 feet 1 inch wide and 6 feet 8 inches tall — the Falcon 10X has been designed to meet these expectations. Dassault has indicated the aircraft will be capable of connecting city pairs such as New York and Shanghai, or Los Angeles and Sydney, without a fuel stop.

Its significance extends beyond size and range. The aircraft incorporates a new-generation carbon-fibre composite wing, advanced flight-control technologies and an entirely new flight deck architecture. It is powered by two Rolls-Royce Pearl 10X engines, each rated at more than 18,000 pounds of thrust and certified for operation on 100 per cent Sustainable Aviation Fuel — a powerplant choice that signals how central emissions performance has become to Dassault's flagship positioning. These innovations are intended to ensure that the Falcon 10X delivers the same combination of efficiency, accessibility and operational versatility that has characterised the Falcon family for decades.

In many respects, the aircraft represents the culmination of Dassault's product strategy. It seeks to offer the space and range demanded by the highest end of the market while preserving the operational advantages that have become synonymous with the Falcon name. Entry into service is targeted for late 2027, with the aircraft now progressing through an intensive flight-test campaign.

A PORTFOLIO BUILT ON PURPOSE

What distinguishes the Falcon family is not simply the capability of individual aircraft, but the logic underpinning the portfolio as a whole.

Each model serves a clearly defined role. The Falcon 2000LXS provides efficiency and practicality for the largest segment of business aviation users. The Falcon 900LX continues to satisfy specialised operators who value the unique advantages of a trijet platform — an architecture carried forward into the Falcon 8X, the family's longest-range aircraft. The Falcon 6X responds to growing demand for spacious cabins and passenger-centric design, paired with an early commitment to SAF-compatible propulsion. The Falcon 8X delivers a compelling combination of global reach and airport accessibility. The Falcon 10X, now in flight testing ahead of its planned 2027 entry into service, is poised to extend these strengths into the ultra-long-range flagship segment, while pushing Dassault's sustainability credentials further still.

Together, they reflect a consistent philosophy that has remained remarkably unchanged despite shifts in the broader market. Rather than defining success solely through cabin dimensions or range figures, Dassault has focused on creating aircraft that maximise the usefulness of every journey. It is a strategy rooted in operational reality, and one that continues to give the Falcon family a distinctive and enduring position within the global business aviation landscape. [SP](https://www.sps-aviation.com)

Falcon 10X represents Dassault's vision for the future of business aviation, an aircraft conceived for a market increasingly dominated by customers who view business jets as extensions of their homes and offices



THE ADANI GROUP UTILISES GENERAL AVIATION AS A FOUNDATIONAL LAYER OF VIABILITY, WITH THE INDUCTION OF STOL AIRCRAFT SUCH AS THE PILATUS PC-24 FURTHER ACCELERATING THIS EFFECT

A CATALYST FOR CORPORATE AGILITY AND NATIONAL ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

In an era where speed defines success, business aviation emerges as a strategic enabler—driving corporate agility, bridging infrastructure gaps, and strengthening economic resilience across India's rapidly evolving industrial landscape

By **JULIAN DSOUZA**, HEAD-AVIATION, ADANI GROUP

IN TODAY'S GLOBALISED ECONOMY, THE VELOCITY OF CAPITAL is inextricably linked to the velocity of decision making by the decision-makers. This article examines business aviation not as a luxury, but as a "Time-Compression Engine" that bridges the infra-

structure gap in emerging economies. Using the Adani Group and other Indian industrial champions as case studies, we analyse how General Aviation (GA) acts as the foundational layer for regional development, fiscal contribution, and human capital optimisation.

PHOTOGRAPH: SARTHAK BARANWAL / SP GUIDE PUBNS

THE VELOCITY OF VALUE

Beyond Executive Travel, in the high-stakes arena of global enterprise, time is the only truly non-renewable resource. While capital can be raised and assets acquired, lost time is irrecoverable. For modern corporations, the ability to be present at the “point of impact” is a strategic necessity. Business aviation has transitioned from a symbol of status to a Force Multiplier, meeting this necessity. Unlike scheduled commercial aviation, constrained by rigid hub-and-spoke models, Business Aviation offers:

- **Point-to-Point Fluidity:** Bypassing congestion at primary hubs to utilise regional airstrips closer to industrial assets.
- **The Mobile Command Center:** Providing a secure, “STIF” (Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility) equivalent environment for M&A and strategic negotiations mid-flight.
- **Agility in Crisis:** The capability to deploy technical teams or leadership within a two-hour window, often deciding the outcome of regulatory or operational flashpoints.

BRIDGING THE “LAST MILE”

Industrial India’s economic geography is characterised by a “Hinterland Paradox”. While financial centers are well-connected, the primary engines of GDP—mines, refineries, and ports—are often located in remote coastal or mineral-rich belts. Business aircraft serve as the first connectivity layer for:

- **Greenfield Industrial Zones:** Where surface infrastructure (rail/road) is still in the gestation phase.
- **Coastal Maritime Hubs:** Connecting offshore assets and port terminals to central command.
- **Regional Agglomeration:** When leadership reaches Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, they bring “The Network Effect”—capital, global standards, and ancillary industries follow.

THE MACROECONOMIC MULTIPLIER

The influence of this sector operates as a structural contributor to national health across three primary dimensions:

- **The Knowledge Economy & High-Value Jobs:** General Aviation sustains a workforce at the apex of the pyramid. From Type-Rated pilots to Licensed Avionics Engineers (LAE) and safety and security auditors, the sector fosters specialised skills that are globally portable and bolster the national aerospace ecosystem. General Aviation is usually the Knowledge, Skills and Attitude training ground of the commercial aviation industry by training rookies of the industry to professionals serving the big and mighty airlines.
- **Fiscal and Infrastructure Contributions:** The sector is a significant “net contributor” to the exchequer through:
 - **Direct Revenue:** Landing/navigation fees and high-bracket GST on non-scheduled operations.
 - **Infrastructure Lead:** Private demand for FBOs (Fixed Base Operators) and MRO (Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul) facilities often justifies the modernisation of secondary airports, which eventually benefits scheduled commercial players and the UDAN scheme.
- **Human Capital Sustainability:** By eliminating “Travel Friction”—queues, layovers, and fatigue—corporations treat

Business Aviation in India has transitioned from a symbol of status to a Force Multiplier, enabling presence at the ‘point of impact’ and the bridging the ‘Last Mile’ connectivity

aviation as a Sustainability Strategy for their most expensive asset - their leadership’s cognitive bandwidth.

CASE STUDY: THE CONGLOMERATE MODEL (ADANI GROUP)

The Adani Group’s trajectory provides a definitive template for aviation-led growth. Spanning ports, renewables, and defence, their operations are inherently asset-intensive and geographically dispersed. With “Aviation-First” deployment in regions like the Kutch coastal belt, or the forested mineral districts of Chhattisgarh and Odisha, the Group utilises General Aviation as a foundational layer of viability.

- **At Mundra:** Private aviation facilitated the arrival of global partners and lenders long before it became India’s largest private port.

Induction of STOL aircraft like the Pilatus PC-24 has accelerated this effect further. Building of VFR uncontrolled Airstrips with less than 5,000 ft runways are serving the projects like Khavda, Annapur Power Plant, Dhamra Port, Krishnapatnam Port, capable of bringing in PC-24 aircraft, has narrowed the gap. The project Engineers, The Technical Experts, and The Leadership can reach the projects in a matter of hours, if not minutes.

- **Governing the Hinterland:** Helicopters provide the “oversight bridge” for mining and power clusters, ensuring safety and governance in areas where surface transport was hampered by monsoons or terrain.
 - **Institutionalising the Sector:** Through airport ownership and the Adani Defence & Aerospace partnership with Leonardo, the group is now bridging the gap between civilian utility and domestic helicopter manufacturing. Peer Industry Patterns.
- The “Infrastructure Follows Capital” model is echoed by other national champions:
- **Reliance Industries:** Transformed Jamnagar into a global refining nerve center via consistent, specialised air connectivity for global OEMs.
 - **JSW & Tata Steel:** Utilised business and general aviation to manage distributed manufacturing at sites like Vijayanagar and Kalinganagar, proving that industrial confidence is built on the speed of access.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the case of Aviation as National Infrastructure, for policy-makers, the conclusion is clear - General Aviation traffic is a leading indicator of economic activation. It proves routes, de-risks remote projects, and attracts Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by signaling a “Ready-to-Operate” environment.

CONCLUSION

The New Boardroom Business aviation is the high-speed “nervous system” of a modern economy. It integrates remote regions into the national narrative, protects human capital, and ensures that the pace of Indian industry matches the pace of global opportunity. In the coming decade, the sky will not merely be a corridor for travel, it will be the boardroom where national prosperity takes flight. **SP**

The author is a retired Wing Commander from Indian Air Force and is Head of Aviation at the Adani Group.



CHETAK HELICOPTER LANDING APPROACH ON AN INDIAN NAVY SHIP

ROTORS THAT REFUSE TO RETIRE

After decades of operational service across India’s most demanding theatres, replacing the ageing Cheetah and Chetak fleets has become one of the country’s most urgent military aviation priorities

By ROHIT GOEL

PHOTOGRAPH: INDIAN NAVY / X

FOR MORE THAN SIX DECADES, THE CHEETAH AND CHETAK helicopters have been constants across India’s military landscape — from the icy heights of Siachen, the world’s highest battlefield at over 6,000 metres, to humanitarian missions following natural disasters. They have carried soldiers, evacuated casualties and served as lifelines to some of the most inaccessible regions on Earth. What was once a remarkable story of endurance has, however, become a story of dangerous delay.

THE LEGACY OF TWO AVIATION ICONS

The Chetak is based on the Aérospatiale Alouette III, which first flew in 1959, while the Cheetah derives from the SA-315B Lama, which first flew in 1969 and entered service in 1971. Both were manufactured under licence by HAL, with the Chetak entering Indian service in 1962 and HAL’s own production beginning in 1965; the Cheetah followed in 1976. Over the decades, HAL produced more than 600 of the two types



THE CHEETAH IS USED BY THE INDIAN ARMY FOR ROUTINELY FLYING FROM SIACHEN'S FORWARD POSTS

for India's Army, Air Force and Navy combined. The Cheetah, in particular, earned near-legendary status for its high-altitude performance — routinely flying from Siachen's forward posts in conditions of extreme cold and thin air that pushed aircraft and crew to their absolute limits. The Chetak, meanwhile, became a versatile multi-role platform across all three services, from liaison and training to casualty evacuation and naval utility duties. Together, they formed the backbone of India's light helicopter capability for a generation.

WHY REPLACEMENT HAS BECOME UNAVOIDABLE

The numbers tell a stark story. Of the approximately 190 Cheetah and Chetak helicopters operated by the Indian Army Aviation Corps, around 30 are in maintenance at any given time — a serviceability deficit of roughly 15 per cent. Close to 130 of those 190 aircraft are between 30 and 50 years old. The Indian Air Force operates a further 120 of these helicopters, with around 25 in maintenance at HAL at any given moment — a deficiency exceeding 20 per cent. Across both services, more than 70 per cent of the combined fleet is over three decades old.

Sustaining such ageing platforms has become progressively harder. Sourcing spares for legacy systems is increasingly complex, maintenance man-hours per flying hour have risen substantially, and the skill base required to keep these aircraft airworthy is itself ageing alongside the machines it supports. Beyond the maintenance burden, modern operations demand capabilities the Cheetah and Chetak were never designed to provide: seamless day-and-night operation, integration with digital battlefield networks, advanced navigation systems, and substantially improved crew safety and situational awareness. The gap between what these platforms are capable of and what the armed forces now need them to do has been widening for years.

PHOTOGRAPH: INDIAN AIR FORCE

THE SAFETY IMPERATIVE

On May 20, 2026, a Cheetah helicopter — operating in one of its re-engined Cheetah variants, itself a stopgap measure designed to extend the fleet's declining service life — crashed in the high-altitude Tangste area of eastern Ladakh, near the Line of Actual Control with China. On board were Division Commander Major General Sachin Mehta and two pilots. All three survived with minor injuries; Army officials described the outcome as nothing short of a miracle, given the sheer difficulty of the mountainous terrain into which the aircraft came down. Photographs of the wreck — the tail section completely destroyed — went viral on social media and turned a longstanding defence procurement failure into a public conversation.

Military aviation experts are careful not to attribute any single accident solely to aircraft age; individual incidents have specific causes and court of inquiry findings must be awaited before conclusions are drawn. Nevertheless, there is broad consensus across the services that modern helicopter platforms provide substantial improvements in engine reliability, crashworthiness, flight management systems and pilot situational awareness. For aircrew operating in high-altitude terrain where weather can deteriorate in minutes and improvised landing zones are the norm rather than the exception, those improvements are not abstract. They represent the difference between a survivable forced landing and a fatal accident.

THREE DECADES OF PROCUREMENT FAILURE

The need for replacement has been formally recognised for more than two decades of active — and repeatedly frustrated — procurement attempts. The first RSH tender was cancelled in 2007 following allegations of procedural irregularities, after years of evaluation. A second tender in the early 2010s met a similar fate. A 2015 inter-governmental agreement with Russia for 200 Kamov Ka-226T helicopters — which would have resolved the



INDIAN AIR FORCE CELEBRATING DIAMOND JUBILEE OF CHETAK HELICOPTER

problem at a stroke — collapsed due to sanctions complications and technology transfer disputes, dying quietly without ever being formally cancelled. The result: the armed forces continue to rely on helicopters that were supposed to be replaced many years ago. The challenge reflects broader institutional pathologies — endlessly revised qualitative requirements, shifting industrial policy priorities, and a procurement machinery whose timelines bear little relationship to operational urgency.

THE RSH PROGRAMME AND THE INDIGENOUS DIMENSION

The latest attempt to address the problem is the revived Reconnaissance and Surveillance Helicopter programme. In August 2025, the MoD issued a fresh Request for Information for 200 new helicopters — 120 for the Army and 80 for the IAF. A formal Request for Proposal is expected by early 2027. The programme, valued at an estimated ₹15,000–20,000 crore, will define Indian Army and Air Force light helicopter aviation for the next three to four decades. The new platforms are required for reconnaissance, surveillance, casualty evacuation, search and rescue, troop transport for special missions and support to civil authorities in emergencies — a broad mandate that reflects how much more the successors will be asked to do compared with their predecessors.

Running alongside, but critically distinct from the RSH, is HAL's indigenous Light Utility Helicopter. The two are entirely separate programmes with different specifications, roles and procurement tracks, and conflating them understates the actual scale of the replacement challenge. The LUH is a 3-tonne single-engine helicopter powered by the HAL-Safran Shakti-1U turboshaft, designed primarily for lower-altitude utility operations, with high-altitude trials conducted successfully up to 6,500 metres including landings at Siachen forward posts. It features a modern glass cockpit, integrated health and usage monitoring systems, and provisions for electro-optical sensors. It received

PHOTOGRAPH: INDIAN AIR FORCE

Initial Operational Clearance for the IAF variant in 2020 and the Army variant in 2021 — both years behind the original 2018 target, following persistent autopilot certification delays. As of mid-2026, around ten aircraft are ready at HAL's Tumkur facility pending final certification. The MoD has approved 171 LUHs — 110 for the Army and 61 for the IAF — with HAL targeting eventual orders of up to 400 units across both services.

The LUH's troubled timeline is instructive in itself: indigenous development offers genuine long-term strategic autonomy and must be supported, but it demands the kind of sustained, disciplined programme management that India's defence acquisition system has not always been able to provide. The RSH, as an open competition, will test whether India can move with the urgency that the operational situation now plainly demands.

CONCLUSION

The Cheetah and Chetak have served India with distinction across six decades and some of the world's most demanding operational environments. Their legacy is beyond dispute. But the May 20, 2026 crash in Ladakh — where a general officer and two pilots walked away from a wreck in mountainous terrain and counted themselves fortunate to do so — is not an isolated event. It is a signal from an ageing fleet operating under rising strain, in a strategic environment that has grown sharply more demanding since the 2020 stand-off along the Line of Actual Control.

The RSH programme, with its RFP expected by early 2027, and the LUH deliveries now beginning after years of delay, together represent the most credible pathway yet towards resolution. But the window for orderly transition is narrowing with every passing sortie. The question is no longer whether to replace the Cheetah and Chetak — that argument was settled long ago. It is whether India's institutions can finally move with the urgency that these aircraft, and the crews who fly them daily in harm's way, have long deserved. [SP](#)



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE HAS SIGNED CONTRACTS FOR 156 LIGHT COMBAT HELICOPTERS 'PRACHAND' WITH HAL. THE FIRST CONTRACT COVERS 66 AIRCRAFT FOR THE INDIAN AIR FORCE; THE SECOND PROVIDES 90 FOR THE INDIAN ARMY. IT IS THE LARGEST INDIGENOUS HELICOPTER ORDER IN INDIAN HISTORY.



(LEFT) THE INDUCTION OF MH-60R SEAHAWKS HAS TRANSFORMED INDIA'S MARITIME ANTI-SUBMARINE WARFARE CAPABILITY; (RIGHT) LEONARDO HELICOPTERS' AW169M IS A LEADING CONTENDERS FOR THE NAVAL UTILITY HELICOPTERS PROGRAMME.



SHAPING INDIA'S FUTURE MILITARY HELICOPTER FLEET

While attention has long focused on replacing ageing helicopters, a broader transformation is underway. From indigenous combat aviation and naval modernisation to medium-lift self-reliance and upgrade programmes already under contract, India is laying the foundations for the most ambitious rotary-wing overhaul in its history.

By ROHIT GOEL

FOR DECADES, MILITARY HELICOPTER PROCUREMENT IN INDIA was driven primarily by replacement needs. Today, that has changed. The Indian armed forces are no longer focused solely on retiring old platforms; they are seeking to transform how rotary-wing aviation contributes to national security — across the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard simultaneously. Taken together, and measured by contracts already signed,

these initiatives represent one of the most significant military aviation modernisation efforts currently under way anywhere in the world.

The transformation is occurring against sharply changing security imperatives. India faces simultaneous pressure along its northern land borders and growing maritime responsibilities across the Indian Ocean Region. In both environments, heli-

copters offer a flexibility that fixed-wing aviation cannot match — and in both, India's current fleet is under mounting strain.

THE LANDMARK PRACHAND ORDER

The single most significant milestone in India's helicopter modernisation arrived on March 28, 2025, when the Ministry of Defence signed two contracts with HAL for 156 Light Combat Helicopters — the Prachand — at a combined value of ₹62,700 crore (approximately \$7.5 billion). The first contract covers 66 aircraft for the Indian Air Force; the second provides 90 for the Indian Army. It is the largest indigenous helicopter order in Indian history.

The Prachand was conceived after the 1999 Kargil War exposed a critical gap: India had no dedicated attack helicopter capable of operating at high altitude. It can now operate above 5,000 metres — a capability no other dedicated attack helicopter in the world can match — making it uniquely suited to the contested terrain along the Line of Actual Control. Fifteen Limited Series Production variants are already in service with the IAF's No. 143 Helicopter Unit at Jodhpur and with Army Aviation. Main production deliveries begin in 2027-28 and run through 2033 at approximately 30 aircraft per year. The order will also end the Mi-25/Mi-35 era, with the IAF planning to phase out its remaining Russian-origin attack helicopters by 2030-31 as Prachand inductions accelerate.

The Indian Army, meanwhile, completed receipt of six Boeing AH-64E

Apaches in 2025 — the first three arriving in July, the final three in December — deployed with the 451 Army Aviation Squadron at Nagtalao, Jodhpur, for western desert sector operations. The IAF already operates 22 AH-64Es across two squadrons at Pathankot, inducted between 2019 and 2021.

THE NAVAL AVIATION IMPERATIVE

Nowhere is the modernisation imperative more visible than in the Indian Navy. The induction of 24 Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawks — ordered in 2020 under a \$2.6 billion Foreign Military Sales agreement — has transformed India's maritime anti-submarine warfare capability. INAS 334 'Seahawks' was commissioned in Kochi in March 2024 and INAS 335 'Ospreys' at INS Hansa, Goa in December 2025, completing the initial induction. The MH-60R was operationally deployed during Operation Sindoor in May 2025. Equipped with dipping sonar, sonobuoys, multi-mode radar, Hellfire missiles, and MK-54 torpedoes, it has introduced networked maritime warfare capabilities previously absent from India's inventory. A \$1.17 billion US-approved sustainment package notified to Congress in December 2024 keeps the fleet combat-ready through its service life.

With the indigenous replacement — the Deck-Based Multi-Role Helicopter (DBMRH), a navalised IMRH variant — estimated to be 8-9 years from production clearance and a further 2-3 years from meaningful induction, the Navy is already planning ahead. Naval Chief Admiral Dinesh Tripathi has publicly

Today, the Indian armed forces are seeking to transform how rotary-wing aviation contributes across the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard

PHOTOGRAPH: HAL/HQBLR/X

PHOTOGRAPHS: PRODENGP/X, LEONARDO

signalled that a follow-on order of 6–8 additional MH-60Rs is under consideration, with preparatory work expected to begin in 2026.

THE NAVAL UTILITY HELICOPTER PROGRAMME

Running alongside the high-end maritime strike mission is an equally urgent requirement: replacing approximately 60 HAL Chetak helicopters still operating from Indian warships — Alouette III derivatives based on a 1950s design — in the basic naval utility role. In August 2025, the MoD issued an RFI for 76 Naval Utility Helicopters (51 for the Navy, 25 for the Indian Coast Guard) under the ‘Buy & Make (Indian)’ category, with an estimated value of ₹5,000 crore and an RFP expected by early 2027. The requirement specifies a twin-engine platform with at least five years of proven naval service capable of 24-hour all-weather operations from both ships and shore bases.

Three serious industrial partnerships have emerged. Leonardo and Adani Defence & Aerospace are offering the AW169M — a purpose-designed naval helicopter with folding rotor blades, shipboard-optimised undercarriage, and a certified 33-minute gearbox dry-run capability — through an MoU signed in February 2026. Airbus and Tata Advanced Systems are competing with the H160M via their Vemagal joint venture. HAL is in contention with its indigenous UH-M, though at approximately 5.7 tonnes its compliance with the under-5.5-tonne weight specification is uncertain.

MODERNISATION WITHOUT REPLACEMENT: THE MI-17V5 PROGRAMME

One of the most consequential elements of India’s helicopter overhaul is not a new platform at all — it is a committed upgrade of what already exists. The IAF operates 151 Mi-17V5 helicopters procured from Russia between 2008 and 2013, which remain its primary medium-lift workhorse. In April 2025, the MoD signed a ₹2,385 crore contract with Bharat Electronics Limited to equip the entire Mi-17V5 fleet with an indigenous Electronic Warfare suite — comprising a Radar Warning Receiver, Missile Approach Warning System, and Counter Measure Dispensing System — designed by DRDO’s Centre for Airborne Systems and Integrated Defence Combat Systems. The contract falls under the Buy (Indian-IDD) framework, with most sub-assemblies sourced from Indian manufacturers. A parallel project upgrades 86 older Mi-17 and Mi-17 1V helicopters similarly, while the IAF has separately called on the private sector to develop indigenous composite main rotor blades — reducing dependence on Russian supply chains for the fleet’s long-term sustainment.

BUILDING THE FUTURE: THE INDIAN MULTI-ROLE HELICOPTER

The most strategically important helicopter programme in India’s long-term roadmap is one that has not yet flown. The Indian Multi-Role Helicopter, under development by HAL in the 12.5-tonne class, is intended to replace the entire Mi-17 family — over 300 aircraft currently forming the logistical spine of Indian military aviation — across all three services and the Coast Guard. Then HAL Chairman D.K. Sunil, confirmed at the Paris Air Show in June 2025 that the company is self-funding early design work pending formal government sanction. A first flight is targeted for 2027-28, with production clearance estimated a further 8–10 years beyond that, placing large-scale service entry towards the mid-2030s. The navalised DBMRH variant adds folding rotor blades and tail boom for shipboard storage aboard INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya, with integration of the Aravalli engine being developed jointly with Safran. Over 550 units are planned across all variants in the first production decade.



THE MOST STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT HELICOPTER PROGRAMME IN INDIA’S LONG-TERM ROADMAP IS THE INDIAN MULTI-ROLE HELICOPTER (IMRH)

THE INDIGENOUS IMPERATIVE

Underlying every programme is a common thread: the determination to build enduring domestic capability. India’s experience with the Mi-17 fleet since 2022 — where Russian supply chain constraints have complicated maintenance and spares procurement — has sharpened

that imperative considerably. The Prachand is a fully indigenous combat helicopter in service. The IMRH targets 75 per cent domestic content. The Mi-17V5 upgrade fits indigenous EW technology to a Russian-built airframe. The NUH mandates local production under a Buy & Make (Indian) route. The approach is pragmatic — combining indigenous development, strategic partnerships and targeted foreign procurement — but the direction is unambiguous.

CONCLUSION

India’s rotary-wing modernisation is no longer a collection of individual procurement decisions. Contracts already signed — the ₹62,700 crore Prachand order, the \$2.6 billion MH-60R deal, the ₹2,385 crore Mi-17V5 EW upgrade, the LUH programme — represent an aggregate well in excess of \$15 billion, placing India among the world’s most active helicopter markets. What is emerging is not simply a more modern fleet, but a fundamentally different conception of what rotary-wing aviation means to Indian national security: networked, indigenous, survivable, and capable of operating from the Siachen Glacier to the depths of the Indian Ocean. The transformation is well under way. Delivering it, on time and at scale, is the harder task that now lies ahead. [SP](#)



AIRLINE PERFORMANCES ARE NO LONGER SOLELY DICTATED BY PASSENGER DEMAND, FLEET SIZE AND LOCAL ECONOMIC HEALTH BUT EXTERNAL FACTORS AS WELL

BEHIND THE RISE IN AIRLINE DISRUPTION ACROSS INDIA

Geopolitical tensions far beyond India’s borders are reshaping airline operations, forcing carriers to navigate longer routes, higher costs and growing uncertainty in an increasingly interconnected aviation landscape

By CHARISHMA CHOWDARY

INDIA’S AVIATION INDUSTRY IS EXPERIENCING UNPRECEDENTED growth, with millions of passengers taking to the skies each year. Yet behind the sector’s rapid expansion lies a growing challenge: Flight Cancellations.

From aircraft shortages and maintenance issues to crew constraints and airport congestion, a range of operational pressures is disrupting schedules and affecting travellers across the country. As airlines race to meet rising demand, questions are emerging about whether the industry’s infrastructure and resources are keeping pace.

TURBULENCE OVER WEST ASIA: HOW GEOPOLITICAL REROUTING AND SOARING COSTS ARE RESHAPING INDIAN AVIATION

The global aviation industry has long been at the mercy of geopolitics, but the recent escalation of instability in West Asia is underscoring this point for Indian carriers. What began as localised tensions thousands of kilometres away has rapidly cascaded into severe operational hurdles for airlines operating out of India.

While passengers frequently attribute flight cancellations to weather or internal crew planning, the underlying culprit

PHOTOGRAPH: SP GUIDE PUBS

ILLUSTRATION: ROHIT GOEL

behind the recent wave of 2026 disruptions is an economic squeeze forced by airspace restrictions and skyrocketing operational costs.

THE GEOMETRY OF AVOIDANCE: ELONGATED FLIGHT ROUTES

When key air corridors over West Asia are restricted or closed entirely due to military risks, airlines cannot simply take the shortest geographical path (known as Great Circle Route). Instead, they must map complex, circuitous detours around conflict zones.

For Indian carriers flying to Europe, North America and parts of the Middle East, these forced diversions add hundreds of extra kilometres and hours to a single journey. When combined with the pre-existing closure of Pakistan airspace for certain routes, Indian long haul international flights are being pushed to their absolute operational limits. The primary layer of this routing gridlock stems from a bitter bilateral standoff.

Following a major terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, both New Delhi and Islamabad clamped down on each other's commercial aviation, initiating a strict, reciprocal airspace closure. This ban is enforced strictly through rolling NOTAM (Notice to Air Mission previously known as Notice to Airmen).

The closure has completely altered the layout of flights heading west out of India. For over a year, instead of crossing straight over Pakistan into Central Asia or the Middle East, Indian flights heading to Europe and North America have been forced to take sharp southern detours over the Arabian Sea. Air India alone has publicly acknowledged that this single detour cost the airline an estimated ₹4,000 crore in cumulative losses during the initial phases of the ban.

Historically, Indian flights could safely navigate the southern diversion by routing tightly through Iranian, Iraqi, or broader Gulf airspace. However, the escalating military conflict in West Asia, specifically surrounding Iran, and the vital maritime and aerial chokepoints near the Strait of Hormuz - has effectively shattered the safety of this alternative.

With the threat of stray ballistic missiles, drone traffic, and electronic GPS jamming, these vital air corridors have become high-risk zones. International aviation watchdogs and insurers have heavily restricted over-flights below specific altitudes.

CRUISING ON RECORD HIGH COSTS

To keep the record accurate, the core crisis is not a physical shortage of jet fuel, but rather a catastrophic surge in fuel consumption and cost. Taking longer routes means burning significantly more Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) per flight. This increased burn rate coincides with a volatile global energy market that has driven international fuel prices to record levels.

To truly understand why airlines are scaling back, you have to look at how violently the economics of a single flight have changed over the first half of 2026. The financial pressure on carriers is driven by a twin crisis: burning more fuel because of longer routes, and paying vastly higher prices for every litre of that fuel.

• **The Global Crude Spike-** Driven heavily by mounting instability around the critical Strait of Hormuz chokepoint, global crude oil prices have surged from their comfortable sub-\$70

per barrel earlier this year to a volatile \$92 per barrel.

- **The International ATF Surge-** Because jet fuel pricing tracks crude, the price of International Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) has absolutely skyrocketed. Carriers that were paying roughly ₹60.50 per litre in early 2026 are now facing a crushing ₹142 per litre peak - a staggering 135 per cent increase (about 2.35 times price hike) for international operations.
- **A Distorted Balance Sheet-** Historically, fuel makes up a substantial but manageable 35 to 40 per cent of an airline's total operating expenses. Today, because of the longer detours and higher prices, fuel costs have ballooned to consume up to 60 per cent of total operating costs, completely erasing the commercial viability of what used to be highly profitable international routes.

To cushion this blow, the Union Cabinet recently approved a massive ₹10,000 crore ATF Price Stabilisation Fund. This fund



THE LOW COST CARRIERS IN INDIA HAVE ANNOUNCED A TEMPORARY DISCONTINUATION OF THEIR FLIGHTS BETWEEN SOME SECTORS DUE TO RISING COSTS AND HAVE SCALED BACK THEIR OPERATIONS

acts as a temporary buffer to advance interest-free loans to oil marketing companies, capping domestic fuel spikes and shielding passengers from immediate hyper-inflation in ticket pricing.

NETWORK RATIONALISATION: THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF CAPACITY CUTS

A prolonged flight time does not just cost more in fuel; it shrinks the availability of the aircraft itself. If a wide-body jet takes two extra hours to return from London to New York, it misses its next scheduled domestic or regional leg. This has reduced overall aircraft utilisation across the network.

Rather than allowing erratic delays to cascade across their entire schedules, India's leading carriers have proactively chosen "network rationalisation" - slashing flights to preserve overall system stability.

Air India recently announced an aggressive adjustment to its network, temporarily cutting or suspending frequencies on 29 international routes through August 2026. In an official statement, the airline noted these steps were "necessitated by continued airspace restrictions over certain regions and record high jet fuel prices for international operations".

- **North American Impact-** Severe curtailments including the temporary suspension of Delhi - Chicago and Mumbai - New York (JFK) routes.
- **European & Asian Trimming-** Routes like Delhi - Paris, Delhi - Singapore, and Delhi - Sydney have faced significant weekly frequency pullbacks.
- **Domestic Fallout-** The international crunch has bled inward. Air India is also temporarily trimming roughly 20 - 22 per cent of its domestic operations to compensate for lower overall fleet availability and industry-wide 3 per cent year-on-year drop in Domestic Traffic.

IndiGo, which has otherwise expanded its dominant domestic market share to 65 per cent has felt the geopolitical squeeze on its international long haul operations.

The low cost carrier announced the temporary discontinuation of its direct flights between India and Manchester. IndiGo has aggressively damp leased Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners to



GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL CROSSWINDS CAN INSTANTLY REDRAW THE FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL BOUNDARIES OF THE SKY DIRECTLY AFFECTING THE AIRLINES

build a European foothold, but as Abhijit Dasgupta (IndiGo VP of Network Planning) notes, "longer flying times due to airspace constraints coupled with dramatically escalating costs" forced them to return aircraft and temporarily scale back.

THE PASSENGER PERSPECTIVE: CHAOS, COSTS, AND BROKEN CALENDARS

For Indian travellers, this geopolitical ripple effect translates to direct friction: reduced flight options, an increased likelihood of last-minute changes and undercurrents of fare volatility. While Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) mandates that affected flyers are entitled to full refunds or free re-bookings, navigating a shrinking summer flight schedule remains an uphill task for consumers.

- **The "Wait-and-Watch" Demand Freeze-** Recent data from DGCA reveals a startling countertrend: Domestic air passenger traffic dropped by 4.2 per cent sequentially in April 2026 (falling to 1.38 crore passengers). Industry analysts attribute this contraction directly to a "wait-and-watch" consumer sentiment. Mindful of unpredictable border escalations, sudden airspace closures — such as Kuwait's abrupt shutdown

following regional security incidents — and the looming threat of being stranded abroad, corporate and leisure travelers are actively deferring non-essential international trips.

• **The Financial Double-Whammy: Fare Surges and Surcharges-** Even though the government introduced a ₹10,000-crore ATF Price Stabilisation Fund to prevent local ticket hyper-inflation, the domestic sector is still feeling the squeeze. Because international wide-body jets are delayed on their long re-routed journeys, they are missing their subsequent domestic legs. This reduction in domestic capacity has pushed local spot fares up, hitting the price-sensitive Indian consumer hard.

• **The On-Ground Reality: Delays, Cancellations, and Regulatory Clashes-** When an airspace closes, passengers don't just lose time; they lose control of their schedules. Recent monthly metrics paint a grim picture of passenger grievance: Over 1.35 lakh passengers were severely impacted by flight delays of more than two hours in a single month. More than 77,000 flyers experienced outright last-minute flight cancellations.

Ultimately, the passenger is no longer just buying a ticket from point A to point B. They are unknowingly purchasing a high-stakes ticket to global geopolitics, navigating a landscape where a closed air corridor over the Middle East translates directly into a missed connection in Mumbai or a ruined vacation in Europe.

CONCLUSION: A NEW ERA OF DEFENSIVE AVIATION

The ongoing disruptions gripping Indian aviation serve as a stark reminder that in a globalised economy, geography is both an asset and a vulnerability. The current crisis has effectively dispelled the illusion that airline performance is solely dictated by passenger demand, fleet size, or local economic health. Instead, external geopolitical crosswinds can instantly redraw the financial and operational boundaries of the sky.

For Indian carriers like Air India and IndiGo, the current playbook is no longer about aggressive international expansion, but rather tactical survival and 'defensive scheduling'. The massive multi-thousand-crore capacity cuts - spanning from domestic regional routes to critical long-haul destinations like Chicago and Manchester - mark a temporary retreat aimed at safeguarding network integrity and conserving cash.

While the Union Government's unprecedented ₹10,000 crore ATF Price Stabilisation Fund provides an invaluable financial shock absorber, it functions as a temporary shield rather than a permanent cure. It offsets the catastrophic financial sting of importing fuel at inflated parity prices, but it cannot shrink the physical distance of a flight detour or manufacture extra aircraft availability.

Ultimately, the sky over India will remain turbulent until diplomatic breakthroughs or ceasefires reopen the vital aerial highways of Pakistan and West Asia. Until then, airlines must continue to balance the scales of profitability against the rigid realities of international conflict, and passengers must adjust to an era where the shortest distance between two points is no longer a straight line, but a complex, costly detour. [SP](#)

PHOTOGRAPH: AINDAIRPORT / X

PHOTOGRAPH: AIR INDIA

MILITARY

SURYAKIRAN AEROBATIC TEAM CELEBRATES 30 YEARS



The iconic Indian Air Force formation aerobatic team, the Suryakiran Aerobatic Team, marked its 30th Anniversary on May 26, 2026. The celebrations were graced by the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh, and Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Training Command, Air Marshal S. Shrinivas. In a special highlight of the event, CAS and AOC-in-C flew with the team during the commemorative aerial display.

Since its formation in 1996, the team has enthralled millions across India and abroad with over 800 air displays. Flying the Hawk Mk-132 aircraft in its iconic red-and-white livery, SKAT continues to inspire generations.

FIRST TPE331-12B ENGINE FOR HTT-40 TRAINER AIRCRAFT



Honeywell has delivered 3 TPE331-12B engines to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's (HAL) HTT-40 basic trainer aircraft for the Indian Air Force.

The TPE331-12B engine's selection for the HTT-40 brings a proven propulsion system to India's newest trainer aircraft. The HTT-40, HAL's indigenously developed basic trainer aircraft, is now in production for the Indian Defence Forces and is powered by Honeywell's TPE331-12B engines. Honeywell will supply the first 16 engines for the fleet, after which HAL will begin local engine assembly and expand in-country repair and overhaul capabilities. Over the coming years, more than 80 engines are planned to support the HTT-40 programme, further building India's expertise in engine sustainment.

APPOINTMENTS



CHIEF OF DEFENCE STAFF (CDS) & SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS

General N.S. Raja Subramani assumed charge as the third Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and Secretary, Department of Military Affairs on May 31, 2026. Prior to assuming the appointment of CDS, he served as Military Adviser at the National Security Council Secretariat.

General Subramani was commissioned into the Garhwal Rifles in December 1985. His distinguished career includes a number of key Command and Staff appointments, including General Officer Commanding, 2 Corps; General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Central Command; and the Vice Chief of the Army Staff.



AIR OFFICER COMMANDING-IN-CHIEF, CENTRAL AIR COMMAND

Air Marshal Tarun Chaudhry assumed the appointment of Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Central Air Command on June 1, 2026. He was commissioned into the Fighter stream of the Indian Air Force in December 1989. Prior to taking charge of Central Air Command, the Air Marshal was holding the appointment of Senior Air Staff Officer, HQ Southern Air Command.



CMD OF HAL

Ravi K. has assumed charge as the 22nd Chairman and Managing Director of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). He brings over 30 years of experience across various sectors such as A&D, manufacturing and electronics. Prior to this, he was the Director (Operations). Earlier, he has held key leadership roles, including Executive Director and General Manager of the LCA Tejas Division, as well as Executive Director (Corporate Planning).



MANAGING DIRECTOR FOR INDIA, BAE SYSTEMS

BAE Systems announced that Tony Walton, has commenced as Managing Director, India, based in New Delhi. In this role, Tony will lead BAE Systems' in-country operations, focusing on supporting delivered hardware, developing new opportunities and fostering greater collaboration with the Indian defence sector.

COLD WAR RIVALS SUFFER STRATEGIC BOMBER CRASHES ON THE SAME DAY

In a remarkable coincidence involving two of the world's most iconic strategic bombers, the United States and Russia each lost a long-range military aircraft on the same day, highlighting the continued reliance of both nations on Cold War-era bomber fleets that remain central to their strategic deterrence capabilities.

A US Air Force B-52 Stratofortress crashed shortly after take-off from Edwards Air Force Base in California's Mojave Desert, killing all eight personnel on board. Thousands of miles away, a Russian Tu-22M3 strategic bomber crashed during a training mission in Siberia's Irkutsk region, although its crew successfully ejected and survived. Despite their age, both bomber types continue to play vital roles in the strategic arsenals of their respective nations.

SUCCESSFUL FLIGHT-TESTS OF RUDRAM-II AIR-TO-SURFACE MISSILE

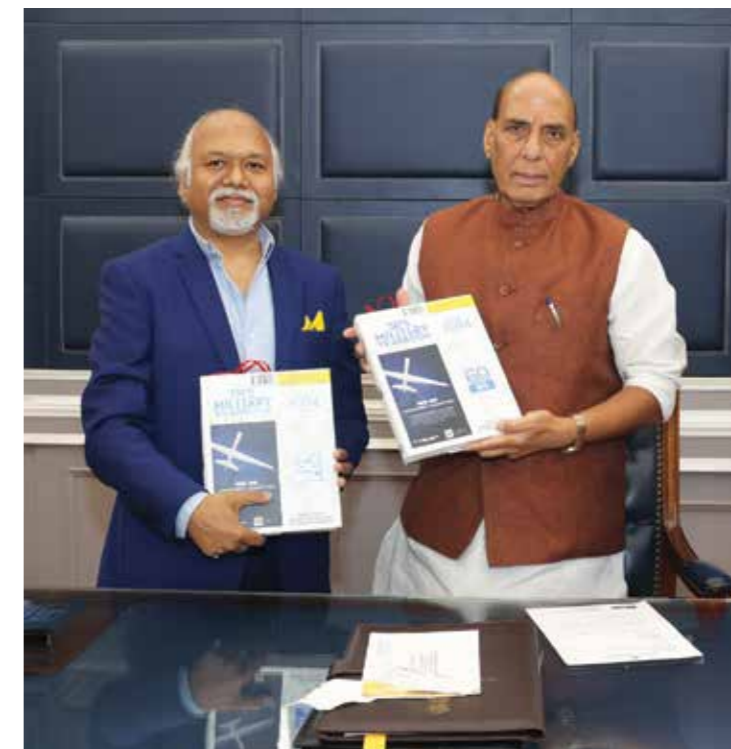
Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) and the Indian Air Force (IAF) have conducted the successful flight-tests of RudraM-II Air-to-Surface Missile from an airborne platform.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has lauded the effort of DRDO, IAF, DPSUs, partners and the industry for the successful flight-tests. He stated that the tests have demonstrated the growing maturity of indigenous defence technologies, contributing significantly to Atmanirbharta in advance weapon systems.

Secretary, Department of Defence R&D and Chairman DRDO has congratulated all the teams associated with the test for the commendable achievement. ●

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Mr Jayant Baranwal, Chairman & Managing Director and Editor in Chief of SP Guide Publications presented copies of SP's Military Yearbook to H'ble Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh at his office. Honorable Defence Minister was full of praise for SP's Military Yearbook as well the journey of SP Guide Publications (founded in 1964). Also warmly appreciated the bouquet (of publications) which consists of wide-ranging and varied focus-based publications by SP Guide Publications.

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