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Issue Brief

Promoting India's Defence Industry: The Role of Defence Exhibition Organisation

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S*ummary*

The Defence Exhibition Organisation (DEO) has played a significant role in shaping India's defence industry by providing a robust platform for showcasing indigenous capabilities, enhancing export potential, and fostering collaborations. As India aspires to become a major defence exporter, the DEO's role in branding and marketing India's defence prowess will be more crucial than ever.

Introduction

The Defence Exhibition Organisation (DEO), established in 1981, is a key arm of India’s Ministry of Defence (MoD), dedicated to promoting indigenous defence products and services both domestically and internationally. From its initial focus on public sector projects and products, the DEO has evolved into a facilitator for India’s broader defence industrial ecosystem. Through high-profile exhibitions such as Aero India and DefExpo, it showcases India’s technological advancements, supports private sector participation and strengthens global defence partnerships. By fostering innovation, creating awareness and attracting investment, the DEO plays a pivotal role in positioning India as a major player in the global defence market. This Brief explores DEO’s origins, objectives, and its role in advancing India’s defence industry.

Establishment and History

A defence exhibition was set up at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi in November 1981 with a view to depict the evolution and activities of the Indian armed forces, steps taken for welfare of ex-servicemen, and the technological advancements made in the field of defence production since independence.¹ This exhibition had two pavilions—one displaying the activities of the defence industry and the other on the theme of ‘defence preparedness’. The three services, inter-service organisations and defence production establishments were the participants in this exhibition.

The exhibition was placed under the charge of ‘Directorate of Defence Exhibition’ in the Department of Defence Production (DDP). The exhibition depicted the technology advancements made in the field of defence production, the role played by defence industries in the national economy since independence and the various activities of the armed forces in the form of attractive exhibits. Special emphasis was laid on the display of welfare measures taken to ameliorate the conditions of the serving as well as retired servicemen. Given the positive response it received, it was decided to make this exhibition a permanent feature.²

The Defence Exhibition Organisation was then set up in 1981 with the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB), the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Directorate General Quality Assurance (DGQA) and the Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) as its co-opted members. The aim was to “project to visiting foreign dignitaries/ purchase missions and the general public, the vivid range of India’s defence production infrastructure”.³ Apart from this exhibition, the DEO also

¹ “Annual Report 1981-82”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1982, p. 149.

² “Annual Report 1982-83”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1983, p. 45.

³ “Annual Report 1994-95”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1995, p. 37.

took steps to establish a ‘defence pavilion’ in the annual India International Trade Fair (IITF), held at Pragati Maidan. In 1982, this Defence Pavilion was awarded the silver medal in the IITF, for excellence and display amongst the central government ministries.⁴

In 1983, the DEO established a dedicated section on ‘recruitment to retirement’ activities of the three services, steps taken for the welfare of ex-servicemen as well as the functions of the DRDO, the DGQA, the Indian Ordnance factories and the Department of Supplies.⁵ A separate section was exclusively designed for the display of weapons and equipment produced by the ordnance factories and the DPSUs. Photographs, display of actual equipment, suitable write-ups and exhibits were used as the modes of presentation. The exhibition was modified to depict the achievements of the defence companies and the

efforts being made in the design and development of the state-of-the-art defence equipment within the country, to make it self-reliant as far as possible for meeting the needs of the armed forces.⁶

Hence, the DefExpo became an attraction at Pragati Maidan and drew large number of people including various dignitaries from different countries.⁷ It functioned as a “show window for the display of stores available for export”.

After India liberalised its economy in the 1990s, the DEO included a number of models, representative samples and photographs mentioning the product range, sophistication and complexities of products manufactured by the private sector as well.⁸ A separate section was dedicated to the three services, including the Coast Guard, Directorate of Recruitment, Directorate of Resettlement and the Directorate of the National Cadet Corp (NCC). The DEO also displayed service equipment currently in use and conducted live demonstrations of its operation.⁹

The DEO in association with the DRDO, the Department of Civil Aviation, the Department of Space (DoS), the Indian Air Force (IAF) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) organised the first Aero India expo air show at Yelahanka air base, Bengaluru in December 1996. The MoD noted that this “would be the first international Aerospace exposition by the Ministry of Defence and is proposed to be held every alternate year.”¹⁰

⁴ “Annual Report 1982-83”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1983, p. 46.

⁵ “Annual Report 1983-84”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1984, p. 81.

⁶ “Annual Report 1985-86”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1986, p. 67.

⁷ “Annual Report 1982-83”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1983, p. 68.

⁸ “Annual Report 1991-92”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992, p. 65.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Annual Report 1995-96”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992, p. 51.

In the IITF held in 1999, the DEO put up an impressive display of the Pakistani weapons captured at Kargil, in its Defence Pavilion.¹¹ In this exhibition, the second edition of the revised catalogue on ‘defence products available for exports’ was released by the Raksha Mantri on 12 October 1999.¹² The year also witnessed the first edition of DefExpo being organised by the DEO. While Aero India is dedicated to aerospace and aviation industry, focus of DefExpo India is on land and naval systems.¹³ Thus, the DEO’s scope of work expanded in terms of planning and organising the Aero India and DefExpo—flagship event of the MoD—apart from coordinating the participation of private companies in defence exhibitions.

Organisation, Objectives and Major Activities

The DEO is organisationally placed under ‘subordinate offices’ of the DDP.¹⁴ The DDP is headed by a Secretary rank officer who is further supported by an Additional Secretary and five Joint Secretaries.¹⁵ The DEO is headed by a Director rank officer of the Defence Industries Promotion (DIP) wing of the DDP.¹⁶

The stated objective of the DEO in the post economic liberalisation period in India was to “evolve into an effective first-tier export promotion agency for defence-oriented products and services”.¹⁷ Currently, the core objective of the DEO is “organising and coordinating aerospace and defence exhibitions in India as well as abroad”.¹⁸ Through these exhibitions, the DEO seeks to promote the export potential of the indigenous aerospace and defence products and services. The DEO undertakes all work related to organising defence and aerospace exhibitions in India apart from enabling and coordinating the participation of Indian defence companies in foreign exhibitions.¹⁹ It is also responsible for projecting the country’s defence production capabilities, its current level of technology and advancements to defence industries for exports.²⁰

¹¹ “Annual Report 1998-99”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1999, p. 61.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ [“Annual Report 2007-2008”](#), Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2008, p. 72.

¹⁴ [“Subordinate offices”](#), Department of Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

¹⁵ [“Our Team”](#), Department of Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

¹⁶ [“Connect”](#), Department of Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

¹⁷ “Annual Report 1993-94”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1994, p. 32.

¹⁸ [“Defence Exhibition Organisation”](#), Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

¹⁹ [“Expression of Interest”](#), Defence Exhibition Organisation, Department of Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, April 2021.

²⁰ “Annual Report 1991-92”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992, p. 64.

Major Activities of the Defence Exhibition Organisation

The DEO organises and coordinates high-profile events that play an important role in promoting India’s defence capabilities.

Domestic Defence Exhibitions

The Defence Pavilion at the IITF was the starting point of DEO’s institutionalised engagements which has over the years, received numerous accolades for its role in highlighting India’s defence sector. Participation in IITF provides an avenue for domestic manufacturers to showcase their products to a diverse audience, including policy-makers, industry leaders and potential international partners. For example, the IITF in 1991 was utilised by over 25 foreign countries to visit these pavilions and many of them displayed key interest in Indian defence products. The Defence Pavilion was very popular with visiting dignitaries and large crowds of general public averaging 2.5 million during 1991 alone.²¹ The integration of the Defence Pavilion with IITF not only generates trade enquiries for the DPSUs, the OFB and the DRDO but also aids in spreading of defence consciousness amongst the populace.²²

The biennial international exhibition Aero India has been held since 1996. It provides an opportunity to display India’s aeronautical and aerospace capability and enable Indian industry to meet the manufacturers from around the world. To date, the DEO has organised 15 editions of Aero India, with the latest edition held in February 2025 at Yelahanka, Bengaluru.²³

DefExpo was conceptualised in 1998 with an objective to promote defence exports from India and exhibit the capabilities of Indian defence R&D and production.²⁴ The first exhibition was held in 1999 as a complementary exhibition to Aero India.²⁵ The first DefExpo India 1999 was availed to meet the representatives from some of India’s target countries.²⁶ DefExpo India is the country’s largest exhibition for land warfare systems, naval defence systems and homeland security solutions. To date, 12 editions of DefExpo have been conducted by the DEO with the last one being held in 2022 in Gujarat—the biggest DefExpo so far.

International Exhibitions

To broaden the reach of Indian defence technologies and industries, DEO organises dedicated pavilions at major international defence exhibitions. To provide a fillip to

²¹ Ibid, p. 65.

²² “[Annual Report 2009-2010](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2010, p. 73.

²³ “[Aero India](#)”, Department of Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

²⁴ “[Defence Minister’s Speech at the Inauguration of DefExpo 2002](#)”, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 19 February 2002.

²⁵ UNI, “[Fernandes Inaugurates Defexpo ’99](#)”, *Rediff*, 12 October 1999.

²⁶ “Annual Report 1991-92”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992, p. 65.

the export efforts, DEO organises ‘India Pavilion’ in selected defence exhibitions abroad to develop a potential market for defence products being manufactured by the DPSUs/ OFB.²⁷ This is part of the attempt to promote ‘Made in India’ brand in the field of defence products.

In addition to this, DEO also participates in several international trade fairs. These events not only serve as a marketing tool but also as an opportunity for Indian companies to engage with overseas investors and discuss partnerships. This is essential for engaging with global defence markets, facilitating technology transfer and securing export contracts. The international presence of DEO underscores India’s ambition to emerge as a major exporter of defence equipment.

The DEO coordinates the participation of various private companies, start-ups and MSMEs in aerospace and defence events in and outside India. Some of the major international exhibitions coordinated by DEO for the private companies are: Latin America Defentech Exhibition, Defence Service Asia (DSA) in Malaysia, Africa Aerospace & Defence (AAD), Berlin Air Show (ILA), Latin America Aero & Defence Exhibition, Aerospace Industry Exhibition (ASET) Tokyo, Seoul International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition (ADEX), Farnborough International Air Show (FIA), etc.

Indian events include the International Fleet Review, Make-In-India-Mumbai, Vibrant Gujarat, events by industry bodies and the armed forces, etc. These exhibitions are visited by ministers, military officers, national and international delegations, public intellectuals, media and business leaders, which provide opportunities for G2G, B2B as well as B2G interactions and discussions.

Role and Future Prospects of the DEO

Promoting Capabilities

By showcasing state-of-the-art defence technologies and weapon systems at prominent exhibitions, DEO plays a role in attracting investments, business contracts and collaborations. Foreign delegations utilise the DEO’s events as a mark of their commitment towards India.²⁸ The presence of international delegations at these events facilitates the exchange of ideas and technology, leading to investments in India’s defence sector. For many foreign vendors, DEO events are the first big opportunity to enter the Indian defence market.²⁹

²⁷ “[Annual Report 2006-2007](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2007, p. 61.

²⁸ Aziz Haniffa, “[High Powered US Defence Team for India](#)”, *Rediff*, 31 January 2006.

²⁹ Ajai Shukla, “[Defexpo India 2012 Kicks off Today](#)”, *Business Standard*, 20 January 2013.

DEO’s exhibitions provide a platform for Indian defence manufacturers, from public sector enterprises to nimble start-ups and MSMEs, to demonstrate their solutions. This not only reinforces the government’s commitment to ‘Make in India’ but also encourages a competitive business environment that can meet global standards. DEO’s flagship events like DefExpo and Aero India have witnessed the signing of numerous contracts and agreements strengthening defence partnerships,³⁰ promoting indigenous manufacturing, and fostering technological collaborations between domestic and international firms. The DEO also serves as a repository of data regarding manufacturers and service providers for the defence as well as civilian markets, apart from bridging gaps between producers, consumers, investors and policy-makers.

Strengthening International Defence Cooperation

The DEO facilitates India’s international engagement by hosting and participating in global exhibitions, thereby acting as a bridge between India and the global defence community. Events like DefExpo and Aero India have been utilised by the DEO to organise discussions with countries of interest for India. For example, the DefExpo 2022 saw the 2nd India–Africa Defence Dialogue which was held on the side lines of the expo. This was an important step towards strengthening defence cooperation with African states.³¹ This not only enhances bilateral relations but also helps communicate the capabilities of India to manage global-scale events and audiences.

Supporting Self-Reliance

The organisation’s activities are in direct alignment with the national priorities of promoting indigenous manufacturing and achieving self-reliance in critical sectors. DEO’s exhibitions underline the government’s commitment to nurturing local industries while attracting global investment. The DEO supports the DDP in vendor awareness in cooperation with the DGQA. It also assists the DDP in organising development programmes for defence production units. A first such vendor development programme was organised at Jammu in November 1997 by the DEO.³²

Public Diplomacy

DEO’s work offers the general public valuable insights into the armed forces and India’s defence industry, fostering greater awareness. For business-oriented visitors, DEO provides a platform for commercial opportunities and collaborations. The Directorate of Public Relations (DPR) of the MoD, in coordination with DEO, ensures extensive publicity for major events like Aero India and DefExpo. These exhibitions

³⁰ [“Defexpo 2008 Review”](#), *Defense Update*, 1 March 2008.

³¹ [“India-Africa Defence Dialogue Held”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 18 October 2022.

³² “Annual Report 1997-1998”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1998, p. 52.

showcase India’s commitment to strengthening its defence sector, highlighting both its intent and capabilities. Beyond this, these events serve as a powerful display of national strength and technological prowess. The grandeur and scale of these exhibitions not only enhance India’s global prestige but also generate extensive media coverage and social media engagement, shaping narratives around the country’s defence advancements.

Organisational Evolution

The DEO was initially envisioned as an institutional mechanism to consolidate India’s public sector defence production capabilities and showcase them on a global stage. However, with the liberalisation of India's economy and the subsequent opening of the defence sector, DEO’s role expanded to include private enterprises, start-ups and MSMEs. This shift not only democratised participation in defence exhibitions but also enriched the quality and diversity of technological innovations presented at these events. Over the decades, DEO’s exhibitions have reflected the transformation of India’s defence sector—from displaying traditional weaponry to showcasing cutting-edge advancements such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), cybersecurity solutions and digital warfare tools. Additionally, the scale, investment and logistics of DEO’s events have evolved significantly, incorporating hybrid exhibition models and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, remote access and centralised data management through dedicated digital platforms.

Conclusion

The DEO has played a significant role in shaping India’s defence industry by providing a robust platform for showcasing indigenous capabilities, enhancing export potential and fostering collaborations. Over the decades, it has evolved from a government-led promotional initiative to a dynamic enabler of defence manufacturing, aligning with India’s self-reliance goals. Through flagship events such as Aero India and DefExpo, the DEO has successfully positioned India as a key player in the global defence ecosystem, attracting investments, facilitating technology partnerships and boosting domestic industry confidence.

Moving forward, the DEO must continue to adapt to the changing dynamics of global defence markets by increasing private sector participation, expanding international engagements and leveraging digital and virtual exhibition platforms. Strengthening ties with emerging defence start-ups, MSMEs and research institutions will further enhance its impact. As India aspires to become a major defence exporter, the DEO’s role in branding and marketing India’s defence prowess will be more crucial than ever. By refining its strategies and enhancing outreach, the DEO can further solidify India’s position as a competitive defence manufacturing hub.

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