

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Reassessing DefExpo's Role in India's Defence Industrial Ecosystem

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S*ummary*

The DefExpo has succeeded in projecting India's defence-industrial ambitions and signalling strategic intent.

Introduction

DefExpo was conceptualised in 1998 to promote India's defence exports and showcase the capabilities of Indian defence R&D and production. Since then, it has evolved as a flagship platform for showcasing India's defence industrial capabilities and promoting defence exports. The exhibition also signalled India's intent to pursue not only strategic autonomy but also a viable domestic defence industrial base capable of engaging with international partners.

Over the last two decades, DefExpo has expanded dramatically in scale, geographic reach and political visibility. Exhibitor numbers have grown, foreign delegations have multiplied, and the exhibition has increasingly been embedded within broader narratives of *Atmanirbharta* in Defence. While the DefExpo has evolved into an essential platform for strategic signalling, domestic industrial outreach and defence diplomacy, its effectiveness as a sustained market-making and export-conversion mechanism remains limited, warranting a recalibration of expectations and institutional design.

The Evolution of DefExpo

DefExpo's trajectory can be broadly understood in three phases, each reflecting shifts in India's defence industrial priorities.

Constraints, Optics and Intent: 1999–2006

The first-ever land and naval systems exhibition was organised by the Department of Defence Production and Supplies (DDP&S) in association with the Confederation of Indian Industry at New Delhi in October 1999.¹ The five-day exhibition attracted 117 international companies from 16 countries, 62 Indian private companies, 39 Ordnance Factories, and eight defence public sector undertakings (DPSUs).² A seminar on 'Force Multiplier Technologies for Navy and Land Warfare' was also organised by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on this occasion.³

The participation of foreign delegates and participants in the first edition of DefExpo was significant, given the geopolitical context. India was still under Western sanctions after conducting nuclear tests in 1998, effectively cutting off all defence cooperation activities and supply of arms and ammunition from the West. On the

¹ “Annual Report 1999-2000”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2000, p. 61.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

other hand, the Kargil conflict had recently concluded. The Western countries, especially the US, became more cognizant of India's position on terrorism as well as the fact that India's rising defence and nuclear capabilities could not be 'rolled back'.⁴ The foreign countries were then left with the choice either to maintain sanctions on India and forgo potential opportunities, or to engage more with India on issues of common interest.

Since 1999, it has become a biennial event, with the number of foreign participants increasing each year. The subsequent editions in 2002 and 2004 saw increased participation by Western companies due to changes in the geopolitical environment and improved relations with India.

A predominantly state-centric ecosystem characterised the editions from 2002 to 2006. DPSUs, Ordnance Factories and DRDO formed the backbone of participation, while private industry played a marginal role. The MoD stated that the expo will be a complementary exposition to Aero India.⁵ In this phase, DefExpo functioned primarily as a demonstration platform, aimed more at visibility and confidence-building than commercial outcomes. The export intent existed, but mainly at the level of aspiration and opportunity exploration.

Projection of Private Sector Capabilities: 2008–2016

This phase coincided with the gradual opening of defence production to private players, an increase in FDI limits in defence⁶ and the introduction of offsets in the defence procurement⁷ policy. During this period, DefExpo increasingly positioned itself as a platform for partnerships, joint ventures and technology collaboration. The exhibition reflected the growing presence of the private sector and foreign OEM interest.

During Defexpo 2008, special emphasis was placed on showcasing the R&D capabilities of Indian defence industries and enhancing their export prospects, along with projecting the Indian defence market as a future vital destination for investment.⁸ This mandate was tweaked in the 2014 edition to include

⁴ Steven E. Sloan, “[U.S. Policy Options For South Asia Now That The Nuclear Genie Is Out Of The Bottle](#)”, Report, U.S. Army War College, 10 April 2001.

⁵ “[Annual Report 2007-2008](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2008, p. 72. Also mentioned in MoD Annual Report 2009–10, p. 73; MoD Annual Report 2016–2017, p. 70.

⁶ “[FDI in Defence Sector](#)”, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 9 February 2024.

⁷ “[Defence Procurement Procedure \(Capital Procurement\)](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 22 August 2006.

⁸ “[Annual Report 2008-09](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2009, p. 76.

internal/homeland security systems in the exhibition, signalling an expansion of DefExpo’s scope.⁹ This, however, diluted the event's focus.¹⁰

Start-ups, MoUs and Exports: 2018–2022

This phase marked a sharper pivot towards exports, innovation and indigenisation. Initiatives such as iDEX, India Pavilion, start-up showcases and buyer-seller meets were foregrounded. DefExpo was also increasingly aligned with defence diplomacy outreach, particularly towards Africa, the Indian Ocean Region, and select foreign partners. In the 2022 edition, Indian companies, Indian subsidiaries of foreign OEMs, divisions of companies registered in India, and companies having joint ventures with foreign OEMs were categorised as Indian participants under the theme ‘Path to Pride’.¹¹ In this edition, 451 MoUs were signed, amounting to an approximate business value of Rs 1.5 trillion.¹² This phase revealed an expansion of objectives: industrial, diplomatic and political.

The highlights of the year-wise editions of DefExpo are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. DefExpo

| Year | Location | Highlights |
|------|-----------|---|
| 1999 | New Delhi | Foreign delegates commended the DefExpo for achieving international standards in its first edition |
| 2002 | New Delhi | The DIA Defence Industry Summit was held to provide a platform for interaction between the top brass of the Indian defence and their international counterparts. |
| 2004 | New Delhi | Permanent Defence Pavilion at Pragati Maidan was integrated with the exhibition. Discussions on bilateral defence industrial cooperation were held. International Seminar on “Outsourcing” and “Offsets” and Defence Industry Summit on FDI and Optimising R&D organised. |
| 2006 | New Delhi | Bharat Electronics Limited showcased its award-winning BFSR – Battlefield Surveillance Radar. 420 companies from 39 countries participated. |

⁹ “[Annual Report 2013-14](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2014, p. 118.

¹⁰ “[Spectacle Sans Substance](#)”, *VAYU Aerospace and Defence Review*, II/2014, pp. 58–61.

¹¹ “[Annual Report 2022-23](#)”, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2023, pp. 68–71.

¹² Ibid.

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|------|-------------|--|
| 2008 | New Delhi | Telecom and IT companies showcased their products and services for the first time. |
| 2010 | New Delhi | A.K. Antony, the then Raksha Mantri, declared that India will very soon publish the ‘Technology Perspective and Capability Roadmap’ to highlight the military requirements for the next 15 years. |
| 2012 | New Delhi | Core agenda was to enhance private-sector participation. |
| 2014 | New Delhi | 624 companies participated, including 368 foreign companies from 30 countries. |
| 2016 | Goa | DPP 2016 was unveiled. Make 1 and Make 2 IDDM categories introduced. 1,055 registered companies from 47 countries participated. |
| 2018 | Chennai | Theme was ‘India: The Emerging Defence Manufacturing Hub’. iDEX scheme launched by PM Modi. First of its kind National Level Open Challenge Competition–“Solution to Problem” for finding solutions to the defence-related problems by Innovators, Students, Professionals, Participants and Foreign Nationals held. India Pavilion set up for the first time. First-ever combined live display of Naval, Aero and Land Systems at the same venue. Revenue generation of approx. Rs 70.27 crores as against Rs 82.82 crores in Def-Expo 16. |
| 2020 | Lucknow | Theme was ‘India: The Emerging Defence Manufacturing Hub’ and the tagline was ‘Digital Transformation of Defence’. DefExpo App was released. African Defence Ministers’ Conclave held. Ministers from 15 African countries participated. |
| 2022 | Gandhinagar | Biggest-ever defence exhibition to date (1,340 companies, 75 countries participated). Theme ‘Path to Pride’, exclusively for Indian companies. Exclusive iDEX Pavilion. Second India-Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) held, more than 53 African countries invited. |

Source: Compiled by the author from primary and secondary sources.

Constraints

The central challenge facing DefExpo lies in the persistent gap between visibility and delivery. The exhibition performs well on optics but fares less convincingly on measurable defence-industrial outcomes.

Scale Limitations

DefExpo is an excellent platform that generates Memoranda of Understanding, licensing announcements and expressions of intent. However, there is little publicly available assessment of how many such agreements mature into sustained production contracts, exports, or long-term industrial partnerships. In the absence of quantification of business outcomes, post-event audits, a unified database tracker, and conversion metrics, MoUs function more as symbolic indicators than as evidence of market traction.

The inclusion of start-ups and innovation platforms such as iDEX has enhanced DefExpo’s narrative relevance, particularly in emerging technology domains. Yet visibility does not automatically translate into scale. Many showcased innovations remain at the prototype or limited-induction stage, facing structural barriers related to procurement cycles, certification, financing and production capacity. The expo highlights innovation but does not address the institutional bottlenecks that impede its absorption, despite bringing all stakeholders together.

Overlap with Aero India

DefExpo and Aero India aim to project India’s defence-industrial capabilities, yet their outcomes differ in essential ways. Aero India benefits from a clear sectoral focus, stronger global benchmarking and more predictable scheduling. Aerospace platforms with longer development cycles and established OEM ecosystems are more naturally suited to this structured engagement. DefExpo, by contrast, aggregates land systems, naval platforms, internal security systems and emerging technologies under a single umbrella, diluting its focus and complicating stakeholder targeting. The coexistence of two mega exhibitions with seemingly overlapping ambitions raises structural questions. Without a clearer division of labour, DefExpo risks becoming a generalist platform competing for attention rather than a specialised marketplace delivering targeted outcomes.

The 2022 Gandhinagar edition marked a symbolic high point, featuring an exclusively Indian exhibition format and extensive diplomatic engagement. Yet the absence of explicit signalling regarding subsequent editions introduces uncertainty. This pause could indicate institutional reassessment, consolidation with other platforms, or a change in priorities within the defence exhibition calendar. Regardless

of intent, unpredictability tends to undermine credibility. Defence buyers and OEMs value consistency, long-term planning and reliability—qualities that exhibitions must embody to function as serious market instruments.

Foreign Outreach to Public Diplomacy

Over time, DefExpo has increasingly served domestic industrial and political signalling functions alongside its external orientation. The geographic rotation of venues away from New Delhi reflects broader efforts to federalise defence-industrial visibility and align exhibitions with emerging industrial corridors and manufacturing clusters.¹³ This shift reinforces state-level participation, integrates local industry, and embeds defence manufacturing within regional economic narratives.

However, it also rebalances DefExpo’s audience from foreign buyers and OEMs towards domestic stakeholders, including state governments, MSMEs, academia and political constituencies. The risk is perhaps a dilution of the buyer-centric focus.¹⁴ As the expo becomes a multi-purpose instrument of industrial showcase, diplomatic conclave, start-up fair and regional investment pitch, its effectiveness as a disciplined defence marketplace may weaken.

Recalibrating DefExpo’s Role

The DefExpo may require recalibration and structural adjustments, some of which are listed below.

Outcome Tracking

Systematic post-exhibition audits of MoU conversions, export agreements and industrial partnerships will enhance credibility. A single-point database within the existing DDP dashboards, with year-wise data organised by appropriate categories, can provide readily accessible references and public oversight.

Tailored Segmentation

Tailoring exhibitions or sub-events to specific regions, platform categories, technologies, or buyer profiles will sharpen the focus. These events can be broad-based to invite participation from think tanks, academia and other stakeholders.

¹³ [“Uttar Pradesh Should Emerge as Defence Manufacturing Hub: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh”](#), *VAYU Aerospace Defence and Review*, Issue 2, p. 36, April 2020.

¹⁴ [“If Defence Expo in Goa Cancelled it Would Embarrass Centre”](#), *Business Standard*, 3 January 2016; TNN, [“Defence Expo Moves From Goa To New Defence Minister’s Home State Tamil Nadu”](#), *The Times of India*, 19 January 2018.

Export Facilitation

Embedding financing, lifecycle support and export clearances into the exhibition framework would address bottlenecks for the smaller companies and MSMEs. A more pronounced differentiation from Aero India, by focusing on a few core themes and increasing publicity and media coverage, would also help develop a distinct identity for the exhibition.

Conclusion

The DefExpo has succeeded in projecting India’s defence-industrial ambitions and signalling strategic intent. It has expanded participation, diversified stakeholders, and embedded itself within broader narratives of indigenisation and export promotion. However, its evolution has been uneven, not due to a lack of effort but to the accumulation of objectives. As India’s defence industrial ecosystem matures, the DefExpo must transition from being a platform that signals capability and intent to one that systematically enables markets. Without this recalibration—a necessary step towards aligning visibility with strategy, it risks remaining a high-visibility event with limited industrial depth.

About the Author



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