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Issue Brief

Beyond the Accidents: LCA Tejas and the Politics of Perception in Defence Markets

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S*ummary*

The accidents involving the LCA Tejas aircraft should not be viewed solely as technical setbacks nor dismissed as media overreaction. They represent stress tests of developing systems, institutional coordination, and India's narrative discipline.

Introduction

Over the past decade, India has made concerted efforts towards self-reliance in the defence sector, particularly through the development of indigenous platforms such as the LCA Tejas. These platforms possess not only operational value but also symbolic significance. High-end technologies, costs, and even the visual profile of modern military platforms contributes to a perceived prestige value. These perceptions are shaped and amplified through media reporting, expert commentary and social media discourse, often influencing public narratives and market sentiment around defence systems.

While formal procurement processes are governed by technical requirements and trials, perceptions can still play an indirect role by shaping broader strategic preferences, export potential, and the confidence of prospective buyers. In some cases, state and non-state actors actively invest in shaping these perceptions, both positively for their own systems and negatively for those of competitors, driven by a mix of commercial and strategic interests. In the Indian context, recent accidents involving the LCA Tejas have triggered immediate and often disproportionate reactions in media and public discourse. This brief examines how such responses shape perceptions of an emerging indigenous platform and what they reveal about the role of narrative management in influencing India’s defence industrial credibility.

The Tejas Episodes: Incidents and Reactions

In case of the LCA Tejas fighter aircraft, three accidents have been witnessed till date, with two of these accidents involving a crash. The first accident occurred on 12 March 2024 in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan when a LCA crashed during a routine training sortie.¹ Notably, the Tejas had first flown in 2001 and had undergone extensive testing and operational flying before the first accident.² The second accident involving the LCA Tejas occurred in Dubai in November 2025 when the aircraft crashed during a high-risk manoeuvre.³ The location amplified its visibility, given the international audience and the high-profile setting. The most recent incident involving an accident of the LCA Tejas occurred in February 2026 wherein the jet was reported to have sustained major damage to its airframe.⁴

¹ Divyam Sharma, [“On Camera Pilot Ejects From Crashing Tejas, Parachutes To Safety”](#), *NDTV*, 12 March 2024.

² [“Background to DRDO Developed Light Combat Aircraft \(LCA\) Tejas”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1 July 2016.

³ [“LCA Tejas Crash in Dubai an Isolated Occurrence: HAL”](#), *The Hindu*, 24 November 2025.

⁴ [“HAL Denies Report About Tejas Jet Crash”](#), *The Hindu*, 23 February 2026.

In all three cases, timing was of particular significance. The 2025 Dubai Airshow crash in particular illustrates how rapidly perception shocks can be amplified. The technical investigations had barely begun before doubts about the aircraft’s reliability flooded social media,⁵ commentary columns, and media reporting. Within a few hours, the questions were no longer about *what went wrong* but about *whether the Tejas itself could be trusted*.⁶ Speculation spread quickly through social media and opinion platforms. Multiple stories and opinions regarding the LCA’s engines, design integrity, supply-chain dependencies, and institutional competence of the HAL and Indian defence industry came up, before any official findings were available.⁷

These reactions are not entirely unique to the defence market since buyers across industries tend to favour systems with proven track records over those associated with repeated incidents. However, the defence market amplifies this behaviour in distinct ways. Military platforms are high-value acquisitions with long service lives, where reliability, political trust and lifecycle support are as critical as technical performance. As a result, accidents are rarely assessed as isolated technical failures. Instead, they get interpreted within broader reputational frameworks surrounding the platform and its supplier state.

This dynamic is particularly important for emerging defence producers such as India. Unlike established suppliers with decades of operational data and large user base, newer platforms lack the depth of credibility that can absorb negative events. Consequently, even isolated incidents generate disproportionate scrutiny that shapes perceptions of reliability and institutional competence in ways that extend beyond the immediate technical cause.

Accidents are an inherent feature of military aviation, arising from a combination of technical, human and operational factors. Even established platforms such as the F-35, Mirage 2000 and Su-30 have experienced crashes over decades of service. Yet not all incidents produce the same reputational impact. The difference lies in platform maturity and the way such events are framed. Established systems often benefit from what may be described as a form of narrative resilience. For instance, when an F-35 crashes, it is typically treated as a specific technical or human-factor issue within a large and proven operational ecosystem. The platform itself is rarely

⁵ Some social media reactions for reference: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRUqJdDCeFs/> and <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRVeMAZk1Wk/>

⁶ Shivam Patel and Tim Hopher, “[Tejas Crash Dampens Export Hopes For Indian Fighter Jet](#)”, *Reuters*, 23 November 2025.

⁷ “[Why Pakistan Cannot Undermine Tejas Despite Its Desperate Global Campaign](#)”, *India Today*, 24 November 2025.

questioned. Their long service history, extensive flight hours, and a wide user base provide a buffer.

By contrast, younger platforms get judged existentially, as they do not possess such depth of credibility. For an emerging platform like the Tejas which is still limited in squadron strength, each incident carries amplified symbolic weight. Unlike more established aircraft, it does not yet have an extensive combat or long-term operational record that can reinforce confidence. The relatively small fleet size⁸ means that any loss is proportionally significant. The HAL's stock price also takes some of the initial consequence of accidents in such cases.⁹ Production delays, engine supply bottlenecks, and declining squadron numbers in the Indian Air Force further intensify scrutiny of the LCA after each incident.¹⁰ In this context, negative perceptions triggered by isolated incidents can have a disproportionate impact, making credibility harder to build and sustain.

Perception Management is now Permanent

What amplifies the reputational impact in the case of the LCA Tejas is not the accident itself, but the handling of information in its immediate aftermath. While technical investigations take time, the first few hours are critical for establishing a baseline narrative. In the absence of prompt and coordinated official communication, information vacuums are rapidly filled by speculation, selective comparisons, and misinformation. For example, in the 2025 accident even prior to the crash, misleading claims about technical issues had already begun circulating, suggesting that perception formation often precedes, and then intensifies, around such incidents.¹¹

In such situations, incidents tend to attract closer scrutiny, not only in terms of technical causes but also in terms of how effectively they are investigated and communicated. While procurement decisions are ultimately based on technical trials and operational requirements, factors such as transparency of investigations, responsiveness of the supplier, and consistency in communication can influence confidence, particularly among prospective export partners. The daily flow of

⁸ [“Light Combat Aircraft Tejas Completes Seven Years of Service in Indian Air Force”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 30 June 2023.

⁹ Debaroti Adhikary, [“HAL Shares Decline 5% on Tejas Crash Reports Company Denies Incident”](#), *The Economic Times*, 23 February 2026.

¹⁰ Shivani Sharma, [“Tejas Mk1A Hit by GE Engine Delays, First Delivery to Air Force Pushed to 2026”](#), *India Today*, 11 December 2025.

¹¹ [“PIB Fact Check: No Oil Leakage in Tejas MK1 at Dubai Air Show”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 20 November 2025.

information regarding new launches, exhibition demos, successful tests, contracts awarded, accidents, combat performances, etc., is almost uncontrollable.

Military platforms and weapons get marketed not only through brochures and official technical trials but also through this constant flow of information. In such an environment, delays in initial official communication create information vacuums that are quickly filled by speculation. This does not imply that premature conclusions should be drawn. Rather, timely and transparent updates acknowledging the incident, outlining known facts, and clarifying that investigations are underway can help prevent unfounded narratives from taking hold. In the absence of such communication, speculation hardens into widely accepted perceptions, influencing broader confidence over time.

Countries with mature defence-industrial ecosystems such as the United States and China have integrated arms marketing with strategic communication. India on the other hand has not yet demonstrated examples of perception management of its indigenously developed military platforms. Despite increasing emphasis on defence exports, India still lacks a coherent approach for crisis communication after accidents, a coordinated messaging across MoD, services, and OEMs and a proactive narrative shaping of its indigenous defence systems. This gap can affect export prospects and platform credibility. Some uncomfortable realities must be acknowledged in this context.

First, performance alone is not sufficient. In defence markets, buyers evaluate not only how a platform performs in trials or operations, but also whether the supplier can reliably sustain it over time through consistent political support, assured supply of spares, maintenance infrastructure, and long-term logistical backing. Second, fragmented messaging weakens credibility. Coordination between the Ministry of Defence, the Indian Air Force, and industry stakeholders must be structured rather than reactive. While accidents themselves cannot be anticipated, the nature of public and strategic narratives that follow such incidents is often predictable. Third, export-oriented manufacturing demands proactive global engagement. Domestic induction of the LCA would serve as an important signal of confidence and capability. However, it will not automatically translate into export credibility, which depends additionally on factors such as sustained operational performance, after-sales support, lifecycle reliability and buyer-specific requirements.

Therefore, several shifts are necessary for putting in place a coherent perception management mechanism for India's indigenously developed military platforms and systems.

Institutionalise Defence Narrative Management

Crisis management and communication should be treated as a core strategic capability, not an ad hoc response. Rapid acknowledgement and controlled technical briefings should become a practice. This has to be built into standard operating procedures. Accidents must be framed clearly as engineering events that are subject to investigation and corrective action, not as national embarrassments requiring silence or defensiveness.

Proactive Global Visibility

India should not rely on a future combat deployment as the primary means of establishing the Tejas' credibility. In the absence of such opportunities, credibility must be built through sustained operational use, selective release of performance data, and exposure. While real-world operational success would undoubtedly enhance its reputation, strategic marketing cannot be contingent upon wartime performance only. The LCA Tejas must be visible consistently through participation in major international air shows, demonstrations in friendly partner countries, international military exercises as well as domestic training exercises, static displays and interactive briefings for foreign delegations and structured engagement with defence analysts and media. Regular visibility can help reduce uncertainty here. Platforms that are seen, demonstrated and discussed in professional settings help acquire familiarity and this familiarity builds confidence.

Induction Scale as a Confidence Signal

Inducting the airforce and naval variants of the LCA in substantial numbers would send a strong signal of institutional confidence in the platform's long-term viability. While domestic induction alone does not guarantee export success, scale matters. A larger operational fleet generates deeper performance data, broader operational experience, and greater resilience to negative perceptions. In such a context, isolated mishaps are more likely to be interpreted within an established reliability record rather than as indicators of systemic weakness.

Resolve Production Bottlenecks

The damage to the credibility of the LCA Tejas can come not from more accidents but by recurring delays in production and induction. Production slowdowns, engine supply constraints, and delivery backlogs have created the perception of systemic fragility around the LCA. Addressing these issues particularly within the manufacturing ecosystem of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited is central to strengthening confidence. Timely delivery of the LCA variants and its integration with

indigenous weapons and systems will signal India’s defence-industrial maturity. In coming years, the LCA needs to be marketed not just as a standalone platform but as a complete aircraft package with its own suite of weapons and systems.

Conclusion

The accidents involving the LCA Tejas aircraft should not be viewed solely as technical setbacks nor dismissed as media overreaction. They represent stress tests of developing systems, institutional coordination and India’s narrative discipline. All such emerging defence platforms are subject to scrutiny. However, their producers often face disproportionate reputational impact because they lack the extensive operational track record and accumulated credibility that established suppliers possess. As a result, similar incidents may be interpreted differently depending on the maturity of the platform and the reputation of the producer.

India’s defence-industrial ambitions are credible and increasingly capable. However, this technological progress must be matched by mature communication strategies, production reliability and global engagement. Credibility in defence markets is built incrementally through consistency, transparency and confidence under pressure. More than the platform itself, it is the larger supportive ecosystem behind it that will matter when it comes to developing long-term strategic credibility. In this competitive landscape of global defence market and trade, perception management therefore is no longer peripheral, it is foundational.

About the Author



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