

## India Prioritizes Drone Development as Economical Alternative to Advanced Fighter Jets



India is increasingly turning to advanced drone technology as a practical and cost-effective interim solution to bolster its aerial defense capabilities, particularly while it awaits the full operational deployment of its fifth-generation fighter jets. This strategic pivot, highlighted recently by Chinese media, underscores a pragmatic approach to modernizing India's military in the face of evolving geopolitical realities and budgetary considerations.

The recent India-Pakistan conflict reportedly saw both nations employing drones for the first time, with India demonstrating success in neutralizing incursions with its S-400 air defense systems. This experience, coupled with insights from other global conflicts, has prompted a decisive shift in India's defense doctrine. According to the Chinese publication South China Morning Post, military experts view drones as a highly effective and affordable alternative for surveillance, precision strikes, and swarm tactics, especially when compared to the substantial investment and longer development cycles of advanced fighter aircraft like India's Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), which is not anticipated to see a prototype before 2028-29.

Drones, with costs ranging from approximately 10 million to 100 million Indian rupees (about \$120,000 to 1.2 million USD), present a stark contrast to the AMCA's projected cost of 150 billion Indian rupees (around 1.7 billion USD). This significant price difference, alongside their rapid development and deployment cycles, makes unmanned aerial systems (UAS) an attractive option for addressing immediate security needs. India's Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan recently emphasized the critical need for integrating cutting-edge

technologies like drones, noting that "recent conflicts have shown how drones can disproportionately shift the tactical balance."

While acknowledging that drones may not possess the multi-role versatility or payload capacity of fifth-generation fighters, their cost-effectiveness and adaptability are driving India's accelerated push towards developing a robust indigenous drone ecosystem. This push includes initiatives such as the Drone Shakti Mission, launched in 2022, which aims to foster innovation among startups and public-private partnerships in homegrown drone technology. However, challenges persist, notably the reliance on imported components, with 60-70% of critical parts, such as batteries and sensors, primarily sourced from China. This dependency highlights a vulnerability that India is actively seeking to mitigate through efforts to build a more resilient domestic supply chain and explore international partnerships for key raw materials. The ongoing focus on indigenization and scaling drone production is expected to be a defining feature of India's defense strategy in the coming decade.