

India Pushes Forward with Sixth-Generation Unmanned Fighter, Awaiting Government Approval



India's defense research establishment has confirmed its readiness to develop a sixth-generation unmanned fighter jet, building on the technologies perfected during the Ghatak Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV) program. The Aeronautical Development Establishment (ADE), a key laboratory under the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), is now seeking final sanction from the government to officially commence the advanced project. This move would propel India into an exclusive club of nations pursuing next-generation autonomous air combat capabilities.

The foundation for this ambitious project is the Ghatak program, which is developing a 13-ton stealth UCAV. According to Dr. Kota Harinarayana, the former chief designer of India's Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas, India is already technologically prepared for this leap. The success of the Stealth Wing Flying Testbed (SWiFT), a subscale prototype of the Ghatak, has validated critical aspects of a "flying-wing" design. This unique, tailless configuration provides a very low radar signature, a key feature for a sixth-generation platform.

The new unmanned fighter is envisioned to operate alongside manned aircraft in a "loyal wingman" role, a concept known as Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T). This would allow a human pilot to control the unmanned platform, sending it on high-risk missions to scout or engage targets in heavily defended airspace, thereby increasing the survivability and effectiveness of the manned aircraft. The Ghatak UCAV itself is designed for both deep-penetration strikes and air superiority roles, equipped with an internal weapons bay capable of carrying a 1.5-ton payload of precision-guided munitions.

While the engineering and design work has progressed, and the technology has been successfully demonstrated, the program's full-scale development awaits crucial funding approval from the government. The Ministry of Defence is reportedly considering a proposal, which, if sanctioned, would mark a significant investment in India's indigenous defense capabilities. This strategic move is seen as essential to counter the growing airpower of regional adversaries and ensure India's technological leadership in future aerial warfare. The outcome of the government's decision will be a critical indicator of India's commitment to self-reliance in cutting-edge military aviation.