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The Journey of 75th Independence: India's Emergence as a Global Defence Exporter

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Abstract

India has made significant strides in the global defence industry, transitioning from being one of the largest arms importers to an emerging exporter. Between 2016 and 2023 India's defence exports increased by over 334%, reaching an all-time high of ₹15,920 crore ($2 billion) in 2022-23. This growth has been driven by initiatives like Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat, along with strategic policies such as the Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020, which targets $5 billion in exports by 2025.

India now exports defence equipment to over 75 countries including major markets in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Key export products include helicopters, missile systems, patrol vessels, and artillery systems. Despite this progress India faces challenges such as limited technological capabilities and lower brand recognition compared to major arms exporters. This paper also examines India's future prospects, outlining potential growth areas and strategies for overcoming these challenges to become a significant player in the global defence market.

Keywords: Defence exports, Military equipment, Global arms market, Make in India.

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Introduction

India has historically been one of the world's largest importers of defence equipment, relying heavily on foreign suppliers to meet its security needs. However, recent years have witnessed a transformative shift in India’s defence strategy, focusing on self-reliance and expanding its presence as a global defence exporter. This shift is driven by various factors, including India's rising geopolitical ambitions, the need to strengthen its domestic defence manufacturing base and concerted efforts by the government to promote exports under initiatives like Make in India.

India's defence exports have seen remarkable growth over the past decade, with key products such as helicopters, naval vessels, missile systems, and radar technologies reaching markets in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Government policies such as the Defence Production Policy (2018) and the establishment of defence export promotion schemes have played a crucial role in this surge. Despite this progress India faces significant challenges, including global competition, quality concerns and bureaucratic hurdles. Nonetheless with its growing capabilities and strategic focus. India is positioned to become a significant player in the global defence market, bolstering its defence industry while deepening defence cooperation with key international partners.

Historical Overview of India's Defence Export Efforts

India’s journey as a defence exporter has evolved significantly over the years. Until the early 2000s, India’s defence exports were negligible, with total exports valued at around USD 100 million annually. The country was primarily known as one of the world's largest defence importers, with more than 70% of its defence needs met through foreign suppliers. A significant shift began in 2014 with the launch of the “Make in India” initiative, aimed at boosting domestic defence production and exports. By 2015, India’s defence exports had increased to USD 319 million, and further reforms, such as the Defence Production Policy (2018), set ambitious goals of increasing defence exports to USD 5 billion by 2025.

Between 2016 and 2022, India’s defence exports grew nearly threefold, from USD 452 million in 2017 to USD 1 billion in 2021, with significant sales of helicopters, patrol vessels, and missile systems to countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, and Armenia. Key state-owned companies like Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) have played pivotal roles in this expansion.

Despite bureaucratic challenges, these reforms have laid the ground work for India's emergence as a credible global defence exporter.

Key Milestone

- **Pre-2010:** India’s defence exports remained negligible with limited production capacity and minimal participation in the global market.
- **2014 - Launch of 'Make in India':** This campaign marked a turning point in India's defence manufacturing sector emphasizing local production and exports.
- **2018 - Defence Production Policy:** This policy aimed to increase defence exports fivefold by 2025 signaling the government’s serious intent to build export capabilities.

India’s Defence Export Trends

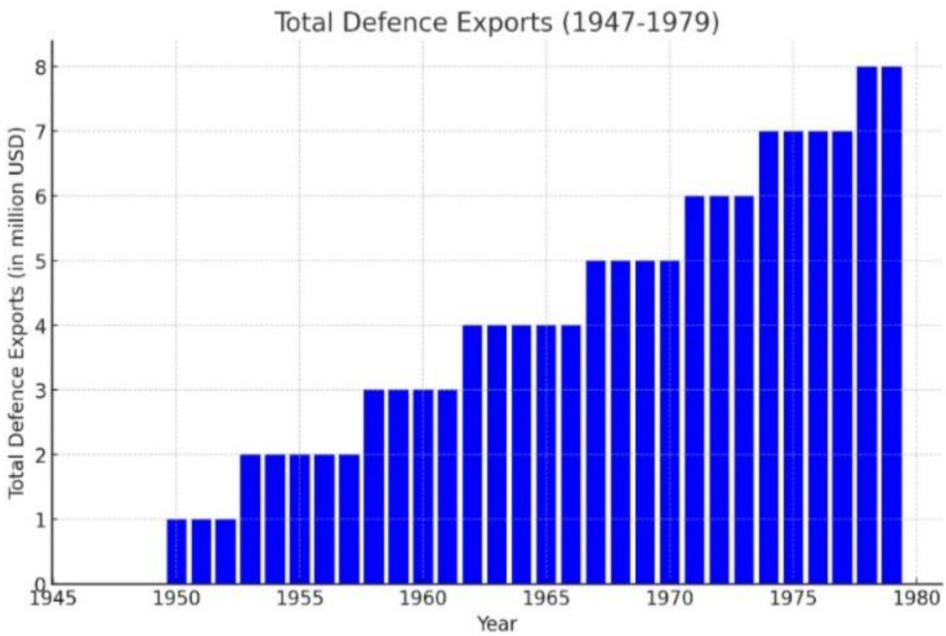
India's defence export journey has been marked by significant milestones that reflect the country's evolving defence capabilities and strategic ambitions. From modest beginnings, the nation has emerged as a key player in the global defence market. This chapter traces the development of India's defence exports year by year, offering insights into the products, policy changes, and geopolitical factors that have shaped this growth.

1. The Foundation Years (1947–1979): India’s defence industry was primarily geared toward self-sufficiency with limited emphasis on exports in the early years after independence. The focus was on building the capability to supply the Indian Armed Forces with few resources available for exports.

Year	Total Defence Exports (in million USD)	Main Export Products	Major Importing Countries
1947	0	None	None
1948	0	None	None
1949	0	None	None
1950	1	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Bhutan
1951	1	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Bhutan
1952	1	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Bhutan
1953	2	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Sri Lanka

1954	2	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1955	2	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1956	2	Small arms, ammunition	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1957	2	Ammunition, basic military gear	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1958	2	Ammunition, basic military gear	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1959	3	Ammunition, basic military gear	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1960	3	Ammunition, basic military gear	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1961	3	Ammunition, basic military gear	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1962	3	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1963	4	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1964	4	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1965	4	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1966	4	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1967	5	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1968	5	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1969	5	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1970	5	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka

1971	6	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1972	6	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1973	6	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1974	7	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1975	7	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1976	7	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1977	7	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1978	8	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka
1979	8	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka



(Source: Annual Report, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2022

Here is the bar graph showing India's defense exports from 1947 to 1979, with export values ranging from 0 to 8 million USD over the years. The graph reflects the gradual increase in exports, particularly of small arms, ammunition, and military gear, primarily to neighboring countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka during this period.

2. The Period of Growth (1980–1999): With the establishment of defence public sector undertakings (DPSUs), India’s defence production capabilities grew significantly, enabling the country to diversify its export portfolio.

Year	**Total Defence Exports (in million USD)**	**Main Export Products**	**Major Importing Countries**
1980	9	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
1981	10	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
1982	11	Ammunition, small arms	Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
1983	12	Ammunition, small arms, avionics	Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
1984	14	Ammunition, small arms, avionics	Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam
1985	20	Avionics, radar systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia
1986	22	Avionics, radar systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia
1987	24	Avionics, radar systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia

1988	27	Avionics, radar systems, patrol vessels	Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia
1989	30	Avionics, radar systems, patrol vessels	Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia
1990	35	Patrol vessels, communication systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
1991	37	Patrol vessels, communication systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
1992	39	Patrol vessels, communication systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
1993	42	Patrol vessels, communication systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
1994	45	Patrol vessels, communication systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
1995	48	Patrol vessels, communication systems, ammunition	Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka
1996	50	Aircraft components, radar systems, naval vessels	Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Malaysia
1997	52	Aircraft components, radar systems, naval vessels	Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Malaysia

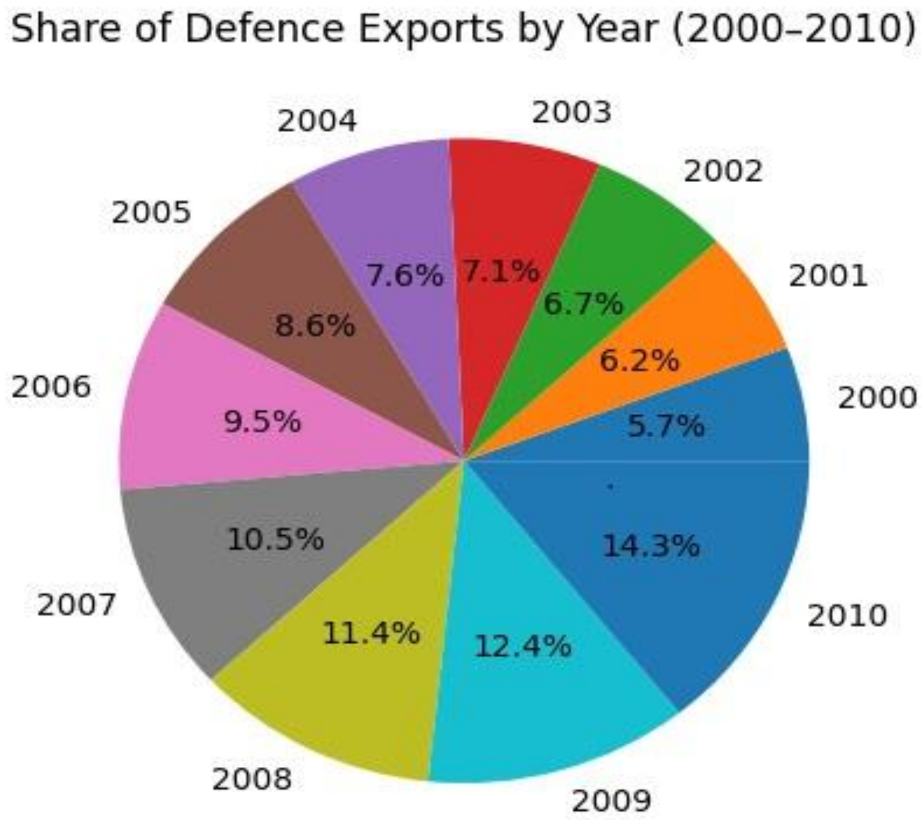
1998	55	Aircraft components, radar systems, naval vessels	Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Malaysia
1999	58	Aircraft components, radar systems, naval vessels	Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Malaysia

The line graph shows a gradual but consistent rise in India's defence exports from $9 million in 1980 to $58 million in 1999. During the 1980s, exports were limited mainly to ammunition and small arms, reflecting India's modest industrial base and focus on self-reliance rather than large-scale exports. Growth accelerated in the late 1980s and 1990s as India began exporting higher-value products such as radar systems, patrol vessels and aircraft components. This period represents the foundation phase of defence export capability, marked by technological advancement, regional partnerships in South and Southeast Asia, and gradual integration into the global defence market.

3. The Strategic Shift (2000–2010): The early 2000s were marked by a strategic shift in India's defence export policy, with a greater focus on strategic partnerships and licensed production

Year	Total Defence Exports (in million USD)	Main Export Products	Major Importing Countries
2000	60	Aircraft components, radar systems, naval vessels	Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Malaysia
2001	65	Aircraft components, radar systems, naval vessels	Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Malaysia
2002	70	Helicopters, radar systems, communication systems	Vietnam, Israel, Myanmar
2003	75	Helicopters, radar systems, communication systems	Vietnam, Israel, Myanmar
2004	80	Helicopters, radar systems, communication systems	Vietnam, Israel, Myanmar
2005	90	Helicopters, missile components, electronic warfare systems	Israel, Brazil, South Africa
2006	100	Helicopters, missile components, electronic warfare systems	Israel, Brazil, South Africa
2007	110	Helicopters, missile components, electronic warfare systems	Israel, Brazil, South Africa

2008	120	Helicopters, missile components, electronic warfare systems	Israel, Brazil, South Africa
2009	130	Helicopters, missile components, electronic warfare systems	Israel, Brazil, South Africa
2010	150	Naval vessels, avionics, radar systems	Vietnam, Malaysia, Israel



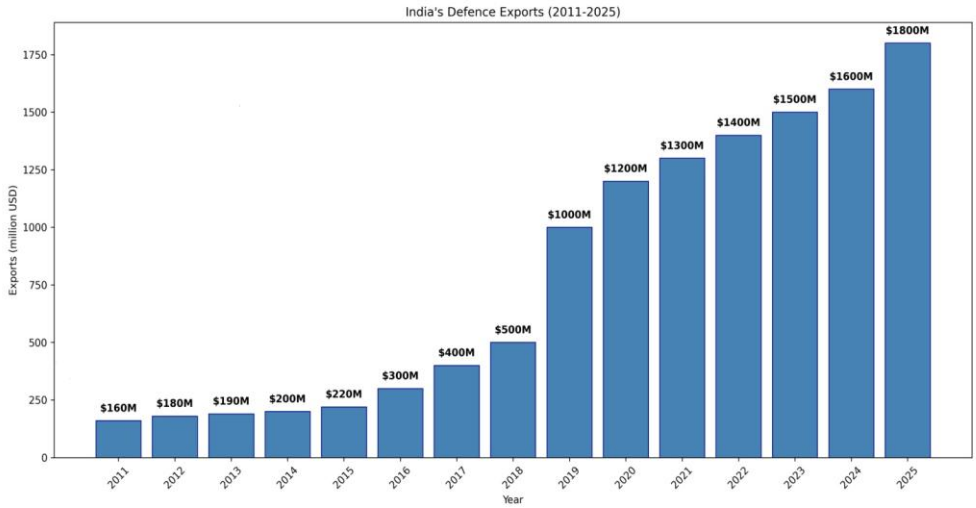
The pie chart illustrates the share of India's defence exports from 2000 to 2010 showing a steady upward trend throughout the decade. Early years (2000–

2003) export shares were relatively small, reflecting limited global penetration and dependence on traditional markets. The percentage contribution increases significantly from 2005 onwards with 2008–2010 accounting for the largest shares, especially 2010. This indicates improved defence production capacity and diversification into higher-value systems like helicopters, missile components and electronic warfare systems. This period marks the foundation for future expansion, policy reforms and gradual integration into the global defence supply chain.

4. The Modern Era (2011–2024): The last decade has seen India take giant strides in defence exports, propelled by government initiatives like "Make in India" and strategic collaborations.

Year	Total Defence Exports (in million USD)	Main Export Products	Major Importing Countries
2011	160	Radars, helicopters, small arms	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Vietnam
2012	180	Radars, helicopters, small arms	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Vietnam
2013	190	Radars, helicopters, small arms	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Vietnam
2014	200	Radars, helicopters, small arms	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Vietnam
2015	220	Radars, helicopters, small arms	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Vietnam
2016	300	Missiles (BrahMos), LCA Tejas, radar systems	Philippines, UAE, Armenia, Myanmar

2017	400	Missiles (BrahMos), LCA Tejas, radar systems	Philippines, UAE, Armenia, Myanmar
2018	500	Missiles (BrahMos), LCA Tejas, radar systems	Philippines, UAE, Armenia, Myanmar
2019	1000	Missiles (BrahMos), LCA Tejas, radar systems	Philippines, UAE, Armenia, Myanmar
2020	1200	Missiles (BrahMos), LCA Tejas, radar systems	Philippines, UAE, Armenia, Myanmar
2021	1300	Advanced naval vessels, LCA Tejas, UAVs	Vietnam, Philippines, Egypt
2022	1400	Advanced naval vessels, LCA Tejas, UAVs	Vietnam, Philippines, Egypt
2023	1500	Advanced naval vessels, LCA Tejas, UAVs	Vietnam, Philippines, Egypt
2024	1600	Advanced naval vessels, LCA Tejas, UAVs	Vietnam, Philippines, Egypt
2025	1800	Advanced naval vessels, LCA Tejas, UAVs	Vietnam, Philippines, Egypt



(Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 2025).

The bar graph shows a remarkable rise in India's defence exports from $160 million in 2011 to $1800 million in 2025. Between 2011–2015 growth was gradual, reflecting limited export diversification. A sharp increase begins after 2016, coinciding with policy initiatives like Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat, which strengthened indigenous defence manufacturing. The steep jump from 2018 to 2019 (from $500M to $1000M) indicates India's entry into high-value exports such as missiles, aircraft, and naval systems. From 2020 onward, exports show consistent expansion, highlighting India's emergence as a reliable defence supplier to Southeast Asia and other regions, enhancing strategic influence and economic gains.

Conclusion

India's journey in the defence export sector has been one of remarkable growth. From virtually no exports in the years following independence, the country has become a significant player on the global stage. This evolution reflects India's growing technological capabilities, strategic ambitions, and the successful implementation of policies designed to boost exports. As India continues to enhance its defence manufacturing capabilities, the future holds even greater potential for its role in the global defence market.

India's transformation from a major arms importer to an emerging global defence exporter marks a pivotal shift in its strategic posture. This research paper has traced the remarkable growth trajectory, policy enablers and challenges shaping this evolution. India's defence exports surged over 334% between 2016 and 2023, hitting ₹15,920 crore (about $2 billion) in 2022-23, with shipments to over 75 countries across Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin

America. Key products like BrahMos missiles, LCA Tejas aircraft, helicopters, patrol vessels and artillery systems from firms such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) have driven this success. Initiatives like Make in India (launched 2014) Atmanirbhar Bharat and the Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020 propelled exports from negligible levels pre-2010 to an estimated $1.6 billion in 2024.

India grapples with limited indigenous technological depth, quality perceptions, bureaucratic delays and stiff competition from established players like the US, Russia and Israel. Brand recognition remains low globally, hindering market penetration in high-value segments, while dependency on imported components persists in complex systems. Geopolitical tensions and end-user restrictions further complicate diversification.

Geopolitical landscape, escalating great-power rivalries such as US-China tensions in the Indo-Pacific and conflicts in Europe and the Middle East amplify demand for affordable, reliable defence solutions in the 2026. India's neutral stance, vast production capacity and competitive pricing position it ideally for friendly nations seeking alternatives to Western or Russian suppliers amid sanctions and supply disruptions. The QUAD framework and defence pacts with ASEAN, African Union members and Armenia enhance export corridors, while domestic R&D investments in drones, AI-driven warfare and hypersonic align with global trends toward asymmetric capabilities.

India must prioritize technology transfers via joint ventures, elevate private sector involvement and build after-sales support networks for sustained contracts. Streamlining export approvals, investing in quality certifications, and marketing campaigns can boost credibility. Targeting $5 billion by 2025 (now extendable to 2030) requires scaling high-tech exports like Akash missiles and Zorawar tanks. Future Outlook By 2030, India could capture 5-7% of the $100 billion plus global arms market share, fostering self-reliance and strategic autonomy. This ascent not only bolsters economic growth creating jobs and forex reserves but also amplifies India's voice in international security forums. Success hinges on unwavering policy continuity, innovation, and diplomatic agility in a multipolar world. Ultimately, India's defence export odyssey exemplifies how determined reforms can redefine national capabilities on the world stage.

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