



Contribution ID: 345

Type: **Paper Abstract (Closed Panels)**

Dynamics of Defense Indigenization: state-private relations in India's quest for self-reliance

Friday 27 June 2025 15:00 (20 minutes)

In an era of hostile geopolitics, states of all stripes are striving to fortify domestic defense industries and secure defense supply lines. Despite increasing scholarly attention on national strategies of self-reliance—especially in rising powers in the global south—the concept and its associated policy of ‘defense indigenization’ (DI) remains little understood on a conceptual and empirical level. Notably, authors have studied broad variations in DI policies across states, while neglecting shifts in the roles of state and private actors over time. This fails to account for the complex and puzzling mix of protectionist and open-market liberalization policies that underlie many national DI strategies, warranting a deeper analysis of ongoing reconfigurations in the competencies of key defense industrial players. Using a case study of the Indian defense industry, this paper provides a unique conceptualization of DI that challenges current statist analyses and explores evolving state-private dynamics in contemporary DI approaches.

Since 2014, under the Modi government, India has seemingly undergone renewed efforts at indigenization, central to which is the further liberalization of its otherwise state-led defense industry. In a systematic mapping of major weapons production, I track historical developments in DI policy and assess whether the “Make in India” campaign represents a critical juncture in state-private defense industrial relations. The findings suggest that India is on the cusp of major defense industrial transformations in its path to self-reliance, constituting an expanded role for the private sector despite persistent institutional and structural constraints. This empirical mapping can offer valuable insights into the political and industrial drivers of DI in rising powers in the Global South. The paper holds serious policy implications for India and other rising powers’ strategic positioning in the global order, contributing to broader debates in political economy and defense/security studies.

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International Relations

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Yes

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Session Classification: Political Economy, Technology and the Defence Industry

Track Classification: Closed Panels: Political Economy, Technology and the Defence Industry