

Strong Nation, Stronger Defense: BJP's Bold Moves to Fortify India's Security

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Abstract

India's national security posture has undergone significant evolution in recent years, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) administration from 2014 to 2020. Rooted in a nationalist ideology emphasising strategic autonomy, the BJP implemented ambitious reforms to strengthen the defense apparatus, reduce import dependence, and enhance military preparedness. Notable measures included establishing the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), revising defense procurement procedures, and pushing for indigenous manufacturing under the "Make in India" initiative. The acquisition of advanced platforms such as Rafale jets, the S-400 air defense system, and intensified counter-terrorism operations collectively signaled a proactive shift in India's security strategy. These developments contributed to improved organisational synergy, technological growth, and assertive deterrence, though persistent challenges remain. Budgetary constraints, bureaucratic delays, and technological gaps continue to impede the full realisation of self-reliance, while regional tensions, particularly with Pakistan and China, test the viability of India's more muscular security posture. Moreover, critiques highlight the politicisation of defense issues and the need to balance assertiveness with diplomatic engagement. Despite these hurdles, the BJP's defense reforms created a foundation for a modernised and agile military. Continued policy coherence, capital investment, and collaboration among government, industry, and international partners are essential for further consolidating India's defense capabilities. This study examines these transformative policy interventions, assesses their impact on India's security environment, and identifies critical pathways for sustaining momentum in defense modernisation. Overall, it underscores the centrality of self-reliance, effective procurement, and innovative technological solutions in India's evolving defense landscape agenda.

Keywords: Bhartiya Janta Party, Defencive Politics, Strategic Autonomy, National Security.

Introduction

India's national security apparatus has undergone significant transformations since independence in 1947. As one of the world's largest democracies and a rapidly growing economy, India's defense strategy has always been a crucial determinant of its regional and global influence (Raghavan, 2019). Over the decades, various governments have introduced reforms and programs to modernise the armed forces, but the pace and efficacy of these efforts have varied. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which first came to power in 2014 and returned with a stronger mandate in 2019,

there has been a marked emphasis on strengthening India's defense sector (Ministry of Defence [MoD], 2019a).

With the BJP's nationalist orientation and emphasis on "nation-first" policies, India has sought to assert itself in regional and international strategic arenas. This has included bolstering military preparedness, streamlining defense procurement, promoting self-reliance in defense manufacturing, and engaging in proactive diplomacy to safeguard national interests (Pant & Joshi, 2020). Key defense reforms, such as the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), restructuring of higher defense organisations, and the push for indigenous production of critical military hardware under the "Make in India" initiative, reflect the BJP-led government's commitment to fortifying India's security architecture (Singh & Sahni, 2019).

This article aims to provide a comprehensive, academic exploration of the BJP's bold moves to fortify India's security apparatus up to 2020. First, it offers a historical overview of India's defense policies, outlining the systemic challenges that have shaped the nation's strategic posture. Next, it delves into the BJP's specific ideology and vision regarding national security, highlighting how it differentiates from previous administrations. The third section details the significant reforms introduced under the BJP, including organisational restructuring, modernisation drives, procurement policies, and measures to enhance indigenous production. The fourth section assesses the impact of these reforms on India's national security environment, while the fifth section examines criticisms and challenges that continue to confront the defense sector. Finally, the conclusion evaluates India's defense readiness under the BJP rule and charts potential pathways for future development.

The analysis draws on scholarly journals, government reports, policy papers, and expert commentaries throughout this discussion. In-text citations follow APA 7 guidelines; a comprehensive reference list is provided at the end. By examining India's defense policy shifts under the BJP, this article contributes to a broader understanding of how political leadership, ideology, and strategic necessities converge to shape a nation's security paradigm.

Historical Context of India's Defense Policies

Early Post-Independence Era (1947–1960s)

India's initial approach to national security was heavily influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of non-alignment and pacifism, which, while morally resonant, led to limited defense preparedness (Basrur, 2017). Post-independence, India inherited a military apparatus designed primarily for internal security and policing of colonial frontiers. The Sino-Indian War of 1962, which resulted in a decisive Chinese victory, exposed the inadequacies of India's defense capabilities, including shortages in equipment, logistical weaknesses, and a lack of cohesive strategic planning (Maxwell, 2019). This conflict served as a wake-up call, compelling Indian policymakers to re-evaluate the importance of comprehensive defense preparedness.

During the 1960s, India's defense sector saw incremental modernisation, fueled by foreign assistance and domestic industrial efforts. Defense production units such as Hindustan

Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) laid the foundation for India's indigenous manufacturing capabilities (MoD, 2019b). Despite this, the primary focus remained on addressing immediate security threats rather than fostering long-term self-sufficiency in defense technology (Chandra & Neelakantan, 2018).

Wars and Strategic Lessons (1970s–1990s)

The 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, highlighted India's growing military capability and strategic confidence (Roy, 2019). However, it was also apparent that India's conventional military strength was periodically tested by regional adversaries, necessitating continuous modernisation. The 1974 nuclear test at Pokhran indicated India's intention to develop a credible deterrent, although this spurred global non-proliferation pressures and sanctions (Pant, 2018).

Throughout the 1980s, India purchased advanced Soviet weaponry, resulting in heavy dependence on foreign arms imports (Gupta, 2017). The 1990s saw significant changes with the end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalisation. Additionally, the nuclear tests in 1998 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (who was from the BJP) marked a critical shift in India's strategic posture, culminating in the formal declaration of India as a nuclear weapons state (Tellis, 2018).

Kargil Conflict and Wake-up Call (Late 1990s–2000s)

The Kargil conflict in 1999 further underscored several operational and intelligence failures (Subramanian, 2019). Despite eventually regaining lost territory, India realised the necessity of more robust surveillance technology, better inter-services coordination, and improved defense procurement processes. This conflict initiated discussions on organisational reforms, leading to the Kargil Review Committee Report, which recommended significant restructuring of India's higher defense management (MoD, 2000).

In the 2000s, India began investing more heavily in its defense sector, including modernising existing equipment, procuring advanced platforms like the Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jets, and developing nuclear-capable ballistic missiles (Joshi, 2019). However, bureaucratic red tape and policy inertia often slow the progress of procurement and indigenous development (Gupta & Singh, 2019). When the BJP returned to power in 2014, it inherited a defense sector undergoing slow modernisation but still grappling with inefficiencies, outmoded procurement practices, and heavy reliance on imports (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

BJP's Ideology and Approach to National Security

Nationalism and Strategic Autonomy

The BJP's approach to national security is rooted in a nationalist ideology that emphasises India's sovereign interests, territorial integrity, and global standing (Jaffrelot, 2017). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership style has been described as assertive and proactive, focusing on enhancing India's military capabilities while simultaneously projecting a strong

country image internationally (Pal, 2019). The BJP's 2014 and 2019 election manifestos both underscored the need for a robust defense posture, self-reliance in military hardware, and "zero tolerance" toward terrorism (BJP, 2019).

Strategic autonomy remains central to the BJP's foreign and defense policies (Pant, 2018). This concept means maintaining the ability to engage with multiple global powers without compromising core national interests. Accordingly, the BJP government has sought to diversify defense partnerships, forging closer ties with countries like the United States, Israel, France, and Japan while maintaining traditional links with Russia (Ganguly, 2019). This multi-alignment strategy aligns with India's desire to avoid being subsumed into any singular power bloc.

Economic Development as a Pillar of Defense

A key aspect of the BJP's outlook on national security is the belief that a strong economy underpins a strong defense (Singh & Sahni, 2019). Initiatives such as "Make in India" have been extended to the defense sector, aiming to develop indigenous manufacturing capabilities, reduce import dependence, and bolster economic growth (MoD, 2019a). The idea is that economic prosperity provides the necessary fiscal resources to fund defense modernisation and elevates India's stature in global forums, granting it more leverage in strategic negotiations (Biswas, 2020).

Integrating Domestic Security and Foreign Policy

Under the BJP, domestic security issues—such as counter-terrorism, insurgencies, and border management—have been integrated more cohesively with foreign policy objectives (Pal, 2019). High-profile incidents like the 2016 surgical strikes against militant camps and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes in Pakistan-administered territory showcased the BJP's willingness to employ a more kinetic, assertive strategy when dealing with cross-border terrorism (Saha, 2019). These actions were domestically popular and were framed by the government as evidence of a decisive shift toward preemptive defense measures (BJP, 2019).

Moreover, the BJP has proactively strengthened alliances with regional and global partners to combat terrorism, enhance maritime security in the Indian Ocean, and ensure freedom of navigation in crucial sea lanes (Pant & Joshi, 2020). This has involved closer collaboration with countries like the United States, Japan, and Australia under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), which seeks to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

Key Defense Reforms under the BJP

Under the BJP-led government, multiple defense reforms were initiated or accelerated to address longstanding organisational, procedural, and technological challenges. These reforms can be broadly grouped into structural, procurement, modernisation, and indigenous production categories.

Structural Reforms: From CDS to Tri-Service Commands

A landmark development in India's higher defense management was the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) position in late 2019 (MoD, 2019a). The CDS was envisioned as the government's single-point military advisor, ensuring greater coordination among the Indian Army, Indian Navy, and Indian Air Force (Singh, 2020). This initiative was recommended by various committees, including the Kargil Review Committee, but it was only implemented under the BJP government's tenure (Subramanian, 2019).

- **Chief of Defence Staff (CDS):** The CDS promotes jointmanship, oversees tri-service organisations, and optimises resource allocation across the military (MoD, 2019a). This structural reform aims to eliminate duplication of efforts and foster synergy in operational planning (Singh, 2020).
- **Integrated Theatre Commands:** Although the official establishment of integrated theatre commands was still nascent by 2020, discussions and proposals laid the groundwork for reorganising India's military into commands that jointly handle operational responsibilities (Pant & Joshi, 2020). The vision is to boost efficiency, reduce redundancies, and strengthen the armed forces' combat capability (Raghavan, 2019).

Defense Procurement Reforms

Procurement inefficiency and bureaucratic delays have long plagued India's defense sector (Gupta & Singh, 2019). Under the BJP, several steps were taken to streamline and expedite the process:

- **Defense Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2016 and Beyond:** The DPP was revised to improve transparency and speed in procurement (MoD, 2019b). Subsequent changes aimed to prioritise "Make in India" categories, reserve specific projects for Indian vendors, and offer incentives for technology transfer (Saha, 2019).
- **Strategic Partnership Model:** Launched to foster collaboration between Indian private companies and global Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), the Strategic Partnership model sought to build domestic manufacturing capabilities in key areas such as submarines, fighter jets, and armored vehicles (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2019). It clarified how foreign defense companies could partner with Indian entities, boosting indigenous production and technology absorption (Biswas, 2020).
- **Offset Policies:** Revised offset guidelines mandated that foreign companies invest some defense contracts into India's defense industry (MoD, 2019b). By strengthening offset obligations, the government aimed to stimulate local technology development, create jobs, and reduce import dependence (Gupta & Singh, 2019).

Modernisation Drives

Acquisition of Advanced Platforms

During the BJP's tenure, India pursued high-profile defense acquisitions to address capability gaps:

- **Rafale Jets:** In 2016, India signed an inter-governmental agreement with France to procure 36 Rafale fighter jets, a deal intended to rejuvenate the aging fighter fleet of the Indian Air Force (IAF) (Saha, 2019). The initial jets were delivered by 2020, boosting India's deterrence and combat capabilities (Pant & Joshi, 2020).
- **S-400 Air Defense System:** In 2018, India inked a deal with Russia to procure the S-400 Triumf air defense system, widely regarded as one of the most advanced anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems globally (Singh & Sahni, 2019). Despite concerns over possible U.S. sanctions, the BJP government prioritised acquisition to enhance India's strategic deterrence and air defense (Ganguly, 2019).
- **Naval Expansion:** The Indian Navy saw inductions such as the indigenously built INS Kolkata-class destroyers and Kalvari-class submarines, strengthening maritime capabilities (MoD, 2019a). Projects like the Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC-1) INS Vikrant highlighted progress in India's ability to design and construct complex warships (Gupta, 2017).

Missile Development and Nuclear Posture and Technological Upgrades

India continued to refine its nuclear triad and missile arsenal under the BJP. Agni-series ballistic missiles were further tested, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) were developed to ensure a credible second-strike capability (Chandra & Neelakantan, 2018). This bolstered India's deterrent posture vis-à-vis regional adversaries. The Defense Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) also conducted tests of advanced weapons like the BrahMos missile, which was developed jointly with Russia, enhancing precision strike capabilities (MoD, 2019b). Acknowledging the expanding realm of cyber warfare, the BJP government supported the formation of the Defence Cyber Agency to protect military networks and develop offensive cyber capabilities (Biswas, 2020). Investments were made in space-based assets for reconnaissance, navigation, and communication to provide real-time situational awareness (Joshi, 2019). Though cyber and space warfare capabilities remained in the early stages of development, these initiatives signaled a forward-looking approach to modern threats.

Indigenous Production: Make in India for Defense

The centerpiece of the BJP's defense industrial strategy was the "Make in India" campaign, which aimed to transform India into a hub for high-tech manufacturing (BJP, 2019). Within the defense sector, this translated to a multi-pronged approach:

1. **Licensing Relaxations:** The Ministry of Commerce and Industry eased licensing requirements for private defense firms, encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2019).
2. **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Policy reforms incentivised collaborations between public sector undertakings (PSUs) like HAL and BEL and private companies (MoD, 2019b).

3. Innovation and Start-ups: Initiatives like the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) program provided funding and incubation support to start-ups working on cutting-edge defense technologies (Saha, 2019).
4. Increasing FDI Limits: To attract foreign investment and facilitate technology transfer, the FDI limit in the defense sector was raised to 49% under the automatic route, with possibilities of going up to 100% on a case-by-case basis (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2019).

These measures reflected the government's goal of reducing India's dependence on imported weaponry, which was estimated at over 60% of its total defense acquisitions in 2014 (Singh & Sahni, 2019). While progress was tangible in areas like artillery (e.g., Dhanush howitzers) and naval shipbuilding (e.g., Vikrant-class carriers), challenges remained in building sophisticated fighter jets, stealth frigates, and advanced electronic warfare systems (Raghavan, 2019).

Counter-Terrorism and Internal Security

Beyond conventional defense, the BJP also focused on internal security, which it deemed integral to overall national security:

- Modernizing Paramilitary Forces: The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and Border Security Force (BSF) received better equipment, technology upgrades, and improved training facilities to tackle insurgencies and border infiltration (Pal, 2019).
- Intelligence Coordination: Efforts were made to improve intelligence-sharing mechanisms among various agencies, such as the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and the armed forces (Ganguly, 2019).
- Border Infrastructure: The government invested in road and communication networks along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China and the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan to facilitate faster troop movement and surveillance (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

Impact on National Security

Assessing the impact of the BJP's defense reforms requires examining quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative indicators include the defense budget, indigenous production levels, and the military's operational capabilities. Qualitatively, factors such as organisational efficiency, international perceptions, and strategic deterrence also illuminate the efficacy of these reforms. By 2020, India's defense budget reached nearly INR 4.71 lakh crore (approximately USD 66.9 billion), making it one of the top five military spenders worldwide (MoD, 2019a). Although this increase in defense expenditure did not solely begin under the BJP, the momentum gained from reforms such as the CDS appointment and revised procurement policies accelerated modernisation. Introducing advanced platforms like Rafale jets and S-400 systems contributed to enhanced readiness and strategic deterrence (Singh, 2020).

Progress in Indigenous Manufacturing

Initiatives under “Make in India” began to yield some results, with indigenously built naval platforms like the INS Khanderi (Scorpène-class submarine) and INS Kolkata (destroyer) entering service (Gupta, 2017). Moreover, collaborations under the Strategic Partnership model set the stage for the domestic manufacturing of helicopters, submarines, and armored vehicles (Biswas, 2020). While India’s dependence on imports remained significant, the policy shifts indicated a long-term trajectory toward reduced reliance on foreign suppliers (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2019). The appointment of the CDS and discussions around integrated theatre commands suggested a shift toward more cohesive and synchronised operational planning (Subramanian, 2019). Coordination among the three services improved in exercises and joint operations, as evidenced by increased tri-service military drills (MoD, 2019b). Enhanced coordination also impacted India’s capacity for swift, decisive responses, as seen in the 2019 Balakot airstrikes (Saha, 2019).

Strengthening of Counter-Terrorism Measures

The BJP’s more assertive stance against terrorism, particularly cross-border terrorism originating from Pakistan, had implications for India’s national security environment. Surgical strikes and Balakot airstrikes demonstrated India’s willingness to engage militarily beyond its borders for preemptive and punitive action (BJP, 2019). Internally, paramilitary forces and intelligence agencies received a mandate for aggressive counter-insurgency operations, contributing to a reduction in militant activities in certain hotspots (Pal, 2019). However, tensions remained high, especially in the Jammu and Kashmir regions, where policy moves such as the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 introduced new security challenges (Jaffrelot, 2019).

Criticisms and Challenges

Despite substantial reforms, the BJP’s defense initiatives faced several criticisms and challenges:

Budgetary Constraints and Priorities

Although the defense budget increased nominally, critics argue that much was allocated to salaries, pensions, and maintenance rather than capital expenditures for modernisation (Ganguly, 2019). The One Rank One Pension (OROP) scheme, introduced earlier but continuing to have fiscal implications under the BJP, further constrained funds available for procurement (Singh & Sahni, 2019). As a result, some modernisation projects faced delays.

Technological Gaps and Import Dependence

India’s indigenous defense manufacturing still lags behind global standards in advanced aerospace, electronic warfare, and cyber capabilities (Raghavan, 2019). The reliance on foreign suppliers for critical technologies, such as jet engines and radar systems, hampers India’s ambition for strategic autonomy (Gupta & Singh, 2019). Although the BJP’s reforms aimed to address this gap, progress was incremental, and obstacles were faced in technology transfer negotiations (Biswas, 2020).

Bureaucratic Bottlenecks

Defense procurement and production in India involve multiple stakeholders—including the MoD, state-run defense PSUs, private companies, and foreign OEMs—leading to complex negotiations and approval processes (Pant & Joshi, 2020). Despite policy revisions, bureaucratic inertia, lack of accountability, and slow decision-making often delayed critical programs (Gupta & Singh, 2019). Repeated revisions of the Defense Procurement Procedure and offset policies, while well-intentioned, sometimes created confusion for foreign investors (MoD, 2019b).

Regional Instability and Balancing

India's regional security environment remains volatile, with persistent tensions on its western and northern borders. The 2019 Balakot airstrikes strained relations with Pakistan, while the Doklam standoff with China in 2017 and subsequent tensions on the LAC highlight continued friction (Pant, 2018). Critics suggest that the BJP's more muscular posture could risk escalation, particularly given China's growing military presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Singh & Sahni, 2019). Balancing assertiveness with diplomacy remains a critical challenge.

Domestic Political Environment

The BJP's strong nationalistic rhetoric, while popular among many voters, has sometimes been criticised for politicising defense issues (Jaffrelot, 2017). Opposition parties accuse the government of using military actions, such as surgical strikes, for political gain rather than purely strategic objectives (Pal, 2019). This politicisation, critics argue, could undermine the apolitical nature of defense policymaking and strategic decision-making (Roy, 2019).

Conclusion

The BJP's approach to national security from 2014 to 2020 strongly emphasised assertiveness, self-reliance, and organisational streamlining. Through structural reforms like the establishment of the CDS, procurement policy overhauls, and a determined push for indigenous production under "Make in India," the government laid a framework to modernise India's defense architecture (MoD, 2019a). Notable acquisitions like Rafale jets, the S-400 air defense system, and indigenous naval vessels underscored a commitment to capability enhancement, while organisational changes indicated readiness for cohesive tri-service operations (Singh, 2020).

Despite these advances, multiple challenges remain. India's defense budget allocation must strike a balance between workforce costs and capital investments in new technology (Ganguly, 2019). Efforts to achieve technological self-sufficiency face ongoing hurdles related to the complexity of defense research and development and the intricacies of technology transfer (Gupta & Singh, 2019). Bureaucratic inertia, political contestation, and regional security dilemmas further complicate India's pursuit of comprehensive defense preparedness (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

Nevertheless, by 2020, the BJP had undeniably steered India's defense sector toward a more robust, forward-leaning posture. If sustained and refined, the momentum generated by these

reforms holds the potential to address longstanding gaps in India's defense capabilities. As India continues to navigate a rapidly changing strategic environment—characterised by global power shifts, emerging military technologies, and evolving threats—the success of these initiatives will depend on steadfast political will, inter-service cooperation, and the effective harnessing of Indigenous talent and resources.

In conclusion, the BJP's bold moves reflect a conscious effort to transform India into a nation capable of safeguarding its territorial integrity and projecting strategic influence. Whether these efforts will ultimately reshape India's defense landscape decisively will hinge on continued policy consistency, budgetary support, and innovation in defense research and development. As the country looks to the coming decade, the successes and shortcomings of the reforms up to 2020 will serve as critical lessons in fortifying national security for a more prominent role in global affairs.

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