

Defence flagship programmes in the GCC, complex yet achievable

The F-35 combat aircraft. The M1 Abrams main battle tank. India's light combat aircraft, the Tejas; and the JF-17, Pakistan's and China's light combat aircraft. Such flagship defence programmes evoke national pride in the countries that produce and operate them. They build the domestic defence industry, inspiring contractors and suppliers to innovate. These flagship programmes meet their armed forces' strategic needs, allowing them to field differentiated defence products that enable mission success. These products strengthen geopolitical relations by establishing credibility and deterrence, and through exports. GCC countries are already building their military industries. Embarking on flagship programmes is the next step.

Defence flagship programmes are intricate, multi-year endeavours. They encompass many layers of complexity and involve multiple players — including ministries, armed forces, defence companies, academia, research institutes, and foreign suppliers. Before deciding which platform to build, governments should ascertain their geopolitical, financial, security, and strategic priorities. That understanding allows a flagship programme to address actual and anticipated national security threats, whether conventional or asymmetric, including the capabilities of potential adversaries. This initial step also provides the holistic metrics for flagship progress, which include the contribution to national security, technological advances, the deepening of the national talent pool, and financial viability.

Governments also should perform something akin to an audit of national capabilities because flagship programmes must mobilise them to succeed. They must know their capabilities in terms of defence industry, financing, industrial production, international scientific collaboration, innovation, research and development (R&D), skilled workers, and technological prowess. Areas of strength in innovation, for example, identify which path to follow. Knowing the state of international research protects intellectual property and allows technology transfer that augments national capabilities.

Governments should assess the current defence inventory, another layer of complexity. A flagship programme replaces existing platforms, demanding adjustments in doctrine and training-as when the U.K. reintroduced conventional aircraft carriers following a gap of 38 years. Governments should synchronize platform transitions so operational capabilities remain constant. At the same time, military end-users of the flagship product should not focus overly on immediate operational needs. Instead, armed forces should consider force development and how a flagship programme delivers future mission success.



Flagship defence programmes evoke national pride, build the domestic defence industry, and meet armed forces' strategic needs. Once a government grasps these starting points and strengths, it should pursue a multifaceted strategy of enablers, policies, and regulations. There are three enablers.

1

The first enabler is strategic communications and transparency to encourage broad support for the flagship programme. Governments and leaders should engage continuously to inspire and motivate the public. For example, the Indian prime minister flew a sortie to raise awareness of the air force receiving its first Tejas fighter. Other programs such as the F-35, JF-17, and Turkey's Altay were showcased in multiple forums during their development journey.

2

The second enabler is collaborative R&D to pool expertise. That means assembling domestic and international partners in academia and industry. For example, the Turkish Defence Industry Executive Committee founded Savunma Teknolojileri Mühendislik (STM) Inc in the early 1990s. The firm provides consulting, engineering, and technology. STM collaborates with universities for R&D in defence technologies. It also plays a role in the Altay, the Turkish main battle tank programme. The Altay is a collaborative, international project that includes South Korean expertise and uses a Hyundai engine.

3

The third enabler is a strong domestic supplier base. Capable domestic suppliers prevent project disruptions. They ensure customized support, national retention of intellectual property advances, and speedy delivery of inputs. Indian suppliers initially delivered more than 50 percent of the Tejas' components and subcomponents, with the ratio due to rise. The Aeronautical **Development Agency developed the** light aircraft concept, the National Aerospace Laboratory designed the fly-by wire technology, and state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited built the Tejas.

The policies and regulations involve financial support and incentives, procurement, and talent attraction. Governments can provide tax incentives, direct funding, or land allocations to encourage private-sector participation. The Turkish government allocated more than 200 hectares of land to privately owned armored vehicle producer BMC to expand its manufacturing facilities for the Altay project. The government also provided more than US\$600 million in equity and \$1.4 billion in incentives for defence projects in 2022.

Governments can ensure project viability and appeal to private companies through advanced orders and procurement processes. The U.S. employed a multiyear procurement strategy to stabilize F-35 production rates for a five-year period, thereby cutting the unit cost.

Governments should attract talent to the flagship programme because such projects demand continuous innovation and problem solving. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) offers college scholarships to students through its Science, Mathematics, and Research for Transformation (SMART) program in return for service in a DoD lab. The U.S. Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act provides training, certification, and career development for acquisition personnel in defence projects. GCC countries can use specialized visas to recruit qualified individuals for their flagship programmes.

Flagship defence programmes are tremendous undertakings, fraught with considerable risk and promising substantial rewards. As GCC countries scale up their defence industries, a flagship programme is the audacious next step.

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