

# DRDO's Ghatak combat drone plan gathers pace

Defence Procurement Board recommends proposal to procure 60 units

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India's indigenous stealth flying-wing combat drone programme received a boost on Tuesday, with the Defence Procurement Board (DPB) of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) recommending that the proposal to procure 60 Ghatak unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), currently under development by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) for the armed forces, be taken forward, a defence source told *Business Standard*.

The programme now awaits approval from the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC).

Ghatak is a stealth-capable UCAV, based on a flying-wing configuration. It is designed for low radar cross-section and internal weapon carriage. Once operational, Ghatak could undertake deep-strike missions, penetrating heavily defended airspace to hit high-value targets without placing pilots at risk.

Operating autonomously or alongside manned aircraft, it could also be tasked with suppressing or destroying enemy air defences — including radar stations and missile systems — and striking strategic infrastructure with precision-guided munitions.

In November, while disclosing that the Indian Air Force (IAF) had drawn up a technology and capability road map titled "Vision 2047", Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) Air Chief Marshal AP Singh had said unmanned systems were not expected to fully replace manned fighter jets in the foreseeable future. However, he empha-



DRDO's autonomous flying wing technology demonstrator

PHOTO: PIB

sised that the IAF was fully backing the Ghatak UCAV programme.

"There are certain areas where you don't want to risk human life, where unmanned systems are necessary — places where they can operate ahead of your manned systems. So, work is underway in that direction, and a number of research and development projects are ongoing," he had said, adding, "The UCAV programme is already on, and we are fully supporting it. We understand it has to be part of our overall force structure. The Vision 2047 document also talks about it."

On December 15, 2023, DRDO successfully conducted a flight trial of the "Autonomous Flying Wing Technology Demonstrator", described in an official release as an indigenous high-speed flying-wing UAV. The demonstrator is understood to be a precursor to the Gha-

tak UCAV.

The trial, carried out in a tailless configuration at the Aeronautical Test Range in Karnataka's Chitradurga, was described in the same release as marking India's entry into an "elite club of countries to have mastered the controls for the flying-wing technology".

The UAV, designed and developed by DRDO's Aeronautical Development Establishment, also demonstrated autonomous landing without the need for ground radars, infrastructure or pilot intervention, enabling takeoff and landing from any runway with surveyed coordinates.

The UAV's maiden flight took place in July 2022.

The prototype is made of indigenously developed lightweight carbon composite material, with the structure impregnated with sensors for health monitoring.