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India's Helicopter-led Counter-UAS Strategy

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Introduction

The rapid proliferation of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) has reshaped conflict zones worldwide. Today's battlefields feature an array of threats, ranging from off-the-shelf quadcopters modified to carry explosives to military-grade loitering munitions and reconnaissance drones. The forces now have an affordable yet potent way to carry out low-cost, high-leverage precision strikes, intelligence gathering, and battlefield disruption. The UAS are no longer a part of future warfare; they are the present. From the Russia-Ukraine war to conflicts in West Asia, UAS are proven to be destructive when employed in large numbers or in coordination with conventional forces. For militaries around the world, addressing these systems has become a need of the hour.

In response to this evolving threat, the Indian Air Force (IAF) continues to refine its anti-UAS technologies. The most recent development includes integration of anti-UAS capabilities into its helicopter fleet. On August 02, 2026, the IAF concluded its weeklong Exercise Rotor Clap III. This specialised counter-UAS exercise was designed to validate tactics, techniques, and systems for how IAF helicopters can hunt such systems. The exercise featured live missile and rocket firing, validating new tactics for engaging with such unmanned systems, which can fly low and avoid being detected by the radars.[1] The article aims to highlight how Ex. ROTOR CLAP III aligns with India's broader plan of developing anti-UAS technologies, and what the significance of such technologies is.

Ex. ROTOR CLAP III 2026

The exercise was explicitly designed to test and refine the operational concepts for employing helicopters as airborne drone hunters. It moved beyond theoretical discussions to practical validation under realistic, simulated combat conditions at the Pokhran Field Firing Range in Jaisalmer district, Rajasthan. It brought together the large spectrum of IAF's rotary-wings, from attack helicopters like the AH-64 Apache and the indigenous Light Combat Helicopter (LCH) Prachand, to transport and utility helicopters such as the Mi-17, Mi-25/35, Chinook and Dhruv.[2] The IAF plans to push its counter-drone capabilities. Designated helicopters are expected to be outfitted with artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled radars, electronic warfare suites (EWS), jammers and lightweight micro-missiles, establishing a dedicated, mobile, airborne anti-UAS weapon, capable of engaging multiple low-flying threats.[3]

Based on the available information, the Indian Army was not part of this exercise, despite operating a comparable fleet of helicopters. The exercise was structured particularly for the IAF.[4] This absence does not necessarily indicate services operating in silos; rather, the standalone

structure reflects phased development, prioritising initial testing within one branch before introducing joint-service operations.

Additionally, the same concept has been tested successfully by the armed forces of several countries across the globe, such as the United States (US) through its Operation Skyfall in 2026 and Operation Flyswatter in 2025; Israeli AH-64A Peten helicopters are already being used in combat to shoot down drones.[5] French Tigre attack helicopters have reportedly achieved a near 100 per cent interception rate against Shahed drones in support operations, using their cannon and missiles.[6]

How Is India Planning to Further Develop Such Technologies?

Anti-UAS systems have become a key priority of the IAF. India is looking closely at its defence industry to develop such technologies. The proposal was discussed during a seminar between the IAF and various defence industries, held in New Delhi on July 30, 2026.[7] At the seminar, the IAF released its latest problem statement proposing the technologies it wants the defence industry to build. The following plans were discussed during the seminar:[8]

1) Specialised micro missiles for helicopters, built to destroy slow-moving, low-flying aerial targets.

2) Inclusion of forward-mounted 20 mm guns for close engagements.

3) AI-powered target identification systems.

4) Lightweight radio frequency and GPS jammers.

5) Air-burst fragmentation warheads.

6) Ultimately building a 25-meter lethal radius.

Significance of Anti-UAS Systems

As UAS risks grow, air forces globally are moving beyond conventional, geographically fixed ground defence. The following points outline how leveraging rotary-wing assets can help the IAF create rapid-response and airborne anti-UAS platforms capable of operating in remote and challenging terrain.

1. Helicopters transition counter-UAS operations from ground-based systems to flexible airborne interceptors that respond rapidly around the battlespace.

2. Vertical takeoff and landing lets crews operate the helicopters out of austere, undeveloped and remote areas where heavy ground systems physically cannot arrive in time.

3. Ground-based air defence systems include a layered network of systems, including radars, sensors, radio frequency detectors, electro-optical cameras, infrared systems, etc., to track the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). After target detection, the response includes soft kill (jamming or spoofing) and/or hard kill (missiles, lasers, interceptors). This setup is spread over a large space, which is less mobile. With the integration of such techniques into helicopters, the IAF will have dedicated airborne UAV hunters, which consist of a comprehensive system on one highly mobile platform.

4. The operational training through exercises like ROTOR CLAP III ensures inter-unit coordination, precision target engagement, rapid response and operational readiness against hostile UAS.

5. Exercise ROTOR CLAP III 2026 not only included attack helicopters, but the IAF also focused on including other types of helicopters as well. The most notable helicopters were the MI-17 series. These helicopters are generally classified as transport helicopters, but during this exercise, the IAF used them to fire a barrage of unguided missiles. This shows how such technology could turn a transport helicopter into a secondary anti-drone system. Additionally, IAF's Chinook and Dhruv helicopters were also a part of this exercise.[9]

Conclusion

India faces a two-front threat from its neighbours who are actively investing in and deploying advanced UAS capabilities. It is crucial for India to safeguard itself against these growing challenges. To remain combat-ready, the IAF conducted a week-long Ex. ROTOR CLAP III in Rajasthan. This tested the capabilities of the helicopter fleets of the IAF. Additionally, during a joint seminar between the IAF and defence industry on July 30, 2026, a list of innovations was requested for the development and integration of anti-UAS systems in helicopters. These developments have placed a strong emphasis on anti-UAS systems, as they are no longer a future prospect; rather, they have become a present phenomenon. As India continues to develop its counter-UAS strategy, such seminars and exercises will continue to serve in building a resilient, adaptive, and technologically advanced air force capable of dominating the new battlespace.

Notes:

[1] Bharat Shakti (@bharatshakti6583), "Rotor Clap-III Builds India's Airborne Drone Hunters," *YouTube*, August 03, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8cebTzj2TQ.

[2] Vijay Mohan, "IAF's helicopter units conduct anti-drone drill in Rajasthan," *The Tribune,* August 01, 2026, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/defence/iafs-helicopter-units-conduct-anti-drone-drill-in-rajasthan/. Accessed on August 04, 2026.

[3] Bharat Shakti, n. 1.

[4] Indian Air Force, "#IAF Helicopters undertook, Exercise Rotor Clap III themed "Counter-UAS" in Rajasthan," *Facebook*, August 01, 2026 at 16:30, https://www.facebook.com/IndianAirForce/posts/iaf-helicopters-undertook-exercise-rotor-clap-iii-themed-counter-uas-in-rajastha/1388986963411122/.

[5] Taras Safronov, "Apache vs Drones: US Tests, Israel Already Shooting Down Shaheds," *Militarnyi,* September 07, 2025, https://militarnyi.com/en/news/apache-vs-drones-us-tests-israel-already-shooting-down-shaheds/. Accessed on August 12, 2026.

[6] Peter Bass, "Helicopters Rise as Drone Hunters: France's Tiger Leads the Charge in Modern Air Defense," *Defence Magazine*, June 05, 2026, https://www.defensemagazine.com/article/helicopters-rise-as-drone-hunters-frances-tigre-leads-the-charge-in-modern-air-defense. Accessed on August 12, 2026.

[7] Firstpost (@Firstpost), Indian Air Force Eyes Micro-Missiles to Turn Helicopters into Drone Hunters," *YouTube,* August 03, 2026, https://youtu.be/13hEw9RAwhA?si=SrVHMYs5QidaelGM.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Firstpost (@Firstpost), "Indian Air Force Helicopters to Become Aerial Drone Defence Platforms," *YouTube,* August 03, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nZtK1LQiMA.