

INTERVIEW: ASHOK ATLURI

MANAGING DIRECTOR, ZEN TECHNOLOGIES

'Preferential treatment needed for local makers'

HYDERABAD-based Zen Technologies designs and manufactures training simulators—which artificially creates combat scenarios—for the armed forces. The company has supplied over 450 simulators to over 100 customers, including the Army, Air Force, Navy, DRDO, and central and state police forces. The Make in India programme, says Ashok Atluri, managing director, Zen Technologies, is a great opportunity for Indian IT defence companies and it is the right time to invest in defence IT. In an interaction with FE's **BV Mahalakshmi**, Atluri says indigenous defence manufacturers require greater policy support. Excerpts:

What is your perception about the Make in India programme?

SMEs are the hubs of creativity and innovation. If we really want to design and develop new defence products and make India a global supplier of defence products, SMEs are our big hope. The market for defence in the next five years is pegged at more than ₹6 lakh crore. With the government's Make in India initiative, there will be a noticeable stress on buying Indian products that are readily



available. The defence ministry has also articulated a need to create a negative list for items that are available or can be sourced in India. It is, indeed, a great time to invest in Indian defence manufacturing.

How is Zen faring as a partner to the defence sector?

Over the years, Zen Technologies has emerged as a key partner to the

defence sector by aligning its focus with the needs of the armed forces. Zen had laid a rule early on—develop only import-substitute products. This has helped us to design products that meet Indian requirements and match foreign makes. We have won most of the orders against stiff foreign competition. However, till now there is no policy preference for indigenously designed and developed

products. In the US, the American companies are supposed to get a 50% price preference over foreign suppliers. Since defence is a strategic industry, we need to create a ground for preferential treatment for products that come out of indigenous R&D. At Zen, we were building a complex library of components of software, firmware, mechanical components, electronic circuits, etc. We now have more than 30 simulator products. This has become possible only because of our ability to rapidly prototype a product by using our existing Intellectual Property. We do believe that Indian companies can achieve global leadership in certain categories entirely through indigenous R&D. Of course, there should be government policies that reward such efforts. Unless success stories are there to celebrate most of the Indian talent will be diverted to apps or websites.

What kind of simulators do you make?

We started offering simulators in 1993, when it was a fairly new concept here. Still, we got the first order only in 1996. Over the years, we have developed a robust portfolio of products and scaled up. Tank training is a critical logistics nightmare—Zen has created arguably the world's best tank simulator in which a soldier can become a proficient driver and gunner. Recently, Zen has started focusing on aviation simulation by developing a full mission Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Simulator and Anti-Aircraft Air Defence Simulator (3AD Sim), first of their kinds in India.