

India-UK lightweight multirole missile deal: Diplomacy undermining Atmanir bharta?

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Introduction

In an attempt to create a more comprehensive advanced weapons alliance, the United Kingdom (UK) announced that it had reached a GBP 350 mn agreement with India to provide Lightweight Multirole Missile (LMM) systems. The contract calls for the Indian Army to receive air defence missiles and launchers manufactured by Thales in Belfast, Northern Ireland, according to a statement from UK's Defence Ministry. In addition to securing 700 jobs at a factory that now produces same missiles for Ukraine, this agreement will significantly enhance British defence sector.¹ According to a joint statement, this agreement will enhance India's air defence capabilities, fulfil present and future demands of the Indian Ministry of Defence in spirit of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India), and foster long-term cooperation on sophisticated weaponry.² In an effort to boost economic growth, Britain's defence industry has pledged to increase spending in accordance with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) targets and is concentrating on increasing exports.³ Hence it should be analysed whether such intergovernmental defence deals under the ambit of Diplomacy and strategic partnerships undermine long term *Atmanirbhar* ambitions of India.

History of LMM / Martlet missile

In order to address needs of Naval and General Staff objective for a man-portable all-arms weapon for self-defence against low-flying aircraft and surface targets, British Royal Radar Establishment carried out a feasibility study in 1966. This study led to development of Blowpipe, a manual command line guidance missile. It was later renamed as Javelin in 1979 which utilized a Semi-Automatic Command Line of Sight (SACLOS).⁴ Advanced Javelin was developed in 1986, two years after Javelin went into service; it was subsequently dubbed Javelin S-15. A laser beam riding system was integrated into the same. The Javelin S-15 (Advanced Javelin) was later dubbed Starburst. Starstreak High-Velocity Missile, which was developed concurrently with Starburst, finally replaced it in air defence role. The United States (US) Office of Naval Intelligence's 2009 paper 'Iran's Naval Forces – From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy' was a crucial point for Western forces understanding of naval fast-moving threat, but Royal Navy and others had already begun work on LMM.⁵

Thus, Thales first demonstrated LMM at Farnborough airshow in 2008. It was created to satisfy military needs without breaking the bank. It weighed only 13 kgs and could be fired from a variety of ground, air, and naval platforms against an equally broad spectrum of targets. This missile was claimed to combine low cost with precision attack that time.⁶ Its serial production started towards the end of 2012. It initially got integrated on the Wildcat Lynx helicopter with an initial production output of 1000 missiles.⁷

Features of LMM system

The LMM has an operational range of 6 kms with 1.5 Mach velocity. It's tailored for operations in air, land, and marine domains thanks to a precision laser beam riding guidance system that permits little collateral damage. It responds to a variety of threats, such as light-armoured, wheeled, and tracked vehicles or airborne platforms, thanks to its triple effect warhead and proximity fuse. In land domain, with a surface-to-air capability that targets unmanned aircraft systems and helicopters, LMM is designed to respond quickly to a variety of surface threats, including vehicles and stationary installations. It is offered on shoulder launch, tripod, and vehicle configuration, offering extremely quick re-engagement and fire-on-move capability.⁸ It is said to be jam-resistant because it employs a Semi-Active-Laser-Homing (SALH) guidance mechanism. The missile follows a laser beam to point of impact after an operator tracks any target with a laser; some models may also incorporate GPS or InfraRed (IR) guidance.⁹ It's based on Starburst Man Portable Air Defense System (MANPADS) that the British Army once employed. This missile has a two-stage motor, warhead, dual mode fuse, guidance electronics, and a very precise control actuator system. It's sealed within a canister and is intended to remain maintenance-free for 15 years of storage.¹⁰

Lethality against a variety of conventional and asymmetric light-skinned and armoured threats is provided by a combined fragmenting and shaped charge warhead. Precision engagement, command override, and immunity against countermeasures are guaranteed by a special LMM laser guidance beam, which is produced by an advanced Laser Transmitter Unit and projects low power coded signals directly to LMM in flight.¹¹ It has a diameter of 76 mm and a length of 1.3 meters. The munition can execute high lateral acceleration movements to attack mobile targets thanks to Control and Actuation System (CAS) and control surfaces. Autopilot software and processing hardware are the main components of guidance processing unit, which gives CAS instructions for precise guidance. Solid fuel propellant and a two-stage rocket motor power LMM.¹²

Potential flaws of LMM system

The LMM systems are somehow seriously outdated. They are presently inferior than even the legacy S-300 systems as per a Russian expert.¹³ There are operational difficulties while using LMM. Despite its guidance system, target acquisition can be challenging in complex situations like crowded areas or choppy waters. Its performance may potentially be impacted by potential interference from laser-based countermeasures or electronic warfare, requiring backup plans.¹⁴

Its guidance systems don't work on a fire-and-forget basis, making it more difficult to use. The MANPADS operator in case of land forces/army must maintain laser beam on target until the missile strikes. In some circumstances, this is neither feasible nor safe. Before its IR seeker engages its target, its guidance maybe disrupted by loss of visual contact with target or other circumstances. At this point, smoke screens and even very dense clouds may become a problem. False targets may also interfere with the original user command.¹⁵

Does India really need LMM?

The UK is on a spree to increase its defence exports and boost its domestic employment. It does not make sense for India to help Britain in their export ambitions and undermine its own domestic defence industry. LMM manufacturers have many challenges, such as lack of workers and an overabundance of red tape.¹⁶ The LMM system's application of SALH guidance is largely responsible for its initial success. However, that could be diminished very easily by changes in corresponding defensive suits. Further operational lifespan of military systems that need human supervision is brief.¹⁷

India already has tested LMM like alternatives domestically like the Helina / Dhruvastra missiles, Mistral missiles, and Very Short-Range Air Defence missiles (VSHORADS) to fulfil the demands of Indian Army and Air Force in order to combat aerial targets in border regions, such as swiftly moving drones, fighter planes, and helicopters.¹⁸ Also, the lightweight nature of the LMM systems won't be effective in providing more kinetic energy for tackling/penetrating heavier surfaces. Hence, opting for LMM will only increase India's defence expenditure which could perhaps be utilized in other fruitful projects.

Conclusion

India is an established missile power and has proved its potential in developing indigenous missile systems for the Indian armed forces since decades. While it could be speculated that the LMM agreement with the UK could be a short-term gap fulfilment deal, it should be emphasised that South Block should avoid/resist getting into defence partnerships which undermine India's *Atmanirbhar Bharat* efforts. While LMM deal with the UK will generate jobs in Britain, South Block officials should emphasise more on acquiring more domestic missiles which are more effective and field- tested rather than going with foreign missiles for the sake of diplomacy only.

Endnotes:

¹ Rezaul H Laskar, "India, UK Ink \$468mn Deal for Supply of Lightweight Missiles", *Hindustan Times*, 10 Oct 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-uk-ink-468mn-deal-for-supply-of-lightweight-missiles-101760035729890.html>.

² "India, UK Sign \$468m-Missile Deal: All You Need to Know about Martlets; How It Will Boost Defence", *The Times of India*, 09 Oct 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-uk-sign-468m-missile-deal-all-you-need-to-know-about-martlets-how-it-will-boost-defence/articleshow/124412109.cms>.

³ Muvija M and Alistair Smout, "UK Signs \$468 Mln Deal to Supply India with Missiles", *Reuters*, 09 Oct 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uk-signs-468-mln-deal-supply-india-with-missiles-2025-10-09/>.

⁴ "Martlet (Lightweight Multirole Missile)", *Think Defence*, 12 Nov 2022, <https://www.thinkdefence.co.uk/2022/11/martlet-lightweight-multirole-missile/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Farnborough 2008: Thales Shows off Lightweight Multi-Role Missile (LMM)", *Flight Global*, 18 Jul 2008, <https://www.flightglobal.com/farnborough-2008-thales-shows-off-lightweight-multi-role-missile-lmm/81891.article>.

⁷ "Lightweight Multirole Missile to Enter Production", *Aerospacefacts*, 13 May 2011, <https://aerospacefacts.com/news-number?id=5131>.

⁸ "Lightweight Multirole Missile", *Thales Group*, n.d, Accessed 10 Nov 2025, <https://www.thalesgroup.com/en/solutions-catalogue/defence/lightweight-multirole-missile-lmm>.

⁹ "Martlet LMM Missile", *Collective Awareness to UXO*, n.d, Accessed 10 Nov 2025, <https://cat-uxo.com/explosive-hazards/missiles/martlet-lmm-missile>.

¹⁰ John Pike, "Martlet Lightweight Multirole Missile (LMM) Future Air to Surface Guided Weapon", *Global Security*, n.d, Accessed 10 Nov 2025, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/martlet.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Thales LMM", *Army Technology*, 01 Jun 2020, <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/thales-lmm/>.

¹³ The Hai, “How Powerful Are the British Missiles That Aid Kyiv That Russian Experts Warn About?”, *Vietnam.vn*, 02 Oct 2024, <https://www.vietnam.vn/en/ten-lua-anh-vien-tro-kyiv-manh-ra-sao-ma-chuyen-gia-nga-canh-bao>.

¹⁴ “Thales UK Demonstrates Versatility of Its Lightweight Multi-Role Missile LMM against Simultaneous Targets”, *Army Recognition*, 14 Jan 2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2025/thales-uk-demonstrates-versatility-of-its-lightweight-multi-role-missile-lmm-against-simultaneous-targets>.

¹⁵ Kirill Ryabov, “Multi-Purpose Rocket Thales LMM Martlet: Threat of a New Generation”, *Top War*, 13 Apr, 2022, <https://en.topwar.ru/194854-mnogocelovaja-raketa-thales-lmm-martlet-ugroza-novogo-pokolenija.html>.

¹⁶ “India Turns to UK’s LMM Missiles, Moving Away from Russian Pantsir Systems”, *Defence Express*, 10 Oct 2020, https://en.defence-ua.com/news/india_turns_to_uks_lmm_missiles_moving_away_from_russian_pantsir-16098.html.

¹⁷ Vijaiinder K Thakur, “Tested in Ukraine, Sold to India! Despite DRDO’s Self-Reliance Claims, Why Is New Delhi Buying UK’s LMM ‘Martlet’ Missiles?”, *Eurasian Times*, 10 Oct 2025, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/drdo-buying-uks-lmm-martlet-missiles-india/>.

¹⁸ “India to Carry out High Altitude Trials of Indigenous Short-Range Air Defence Missiles”, *Economic Times*, 16 Jun 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-carry-out-high-altitude-trials-of-indigenous-short-range-air-defence-missiles/articleshow/111039657.cms?from=mdr>.

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