



## ***ROBUST US-INDIA ARMS SALES MAY FACE TESTS UNDER TRUMP***

BY NITIN A. GOKHALE

*Nitin A. Gokhale ([nitinagokhale@gmail.com](mailto:nitinagokhale@gmail.com)) is a strategic affairs analyst and media entrepreneur based out of New Delhi.*

*The following analysis was made possible through the support of the Hindu American Foundation*

“Starting this year, we’ll be increasing military sales to India by many billions of dollars. We’re also paving the way to ultimately provide India with the F-35 stealth fighters.”

With that one remark on Feb. 13, during his joint press conference with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the White House, President Donald Trump has sought to pull India deeper into the American orbit. The 5<sup>th</sup>-generation fighter has so far been selectively sold only to America’s staunchest allies.

Of course, as India’s Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said in Washington DC as a follow-up to the two leaders’ interaction, “I don’t think with regard to the acquisition of an advanced aviation platform by India, that process has started as yet. So, this is currently something that’s at the stage of a proposal. But I don’t think the formal process in this regard has started as yet.” Misri’s remark has not stopped intense debate in India about the efficacy of buying the F-35, but Prime Minister Modi’s meeting with President Trump so early in his second tenure has certainly triggered high-level meetings within the Indian establishment to plot the trajectory the India-US defense relationship is likely to take in the next few years.

To be sure, defense has been central to the overall relationship between India and the United States for the

past decade. The relationship has evolved and now has bilateral mechanisms at a variety of levels to improve cooperation and collaboration. At the highest level is the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue co-chaired by the Indian minister of external affairs and minister of defense and the US secretary of state and secretary of defense. This dialogue provides guidance on political, military, and strategic issues. The Defense Policy Group (DPG) headed by the Indian Defense Secretary and US Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) provides a platform for a comprehensive review of defense dialogues and mechanisms. Other bilateral dialogue mechanisms are the Defense Production and Procurement Group (DPPG), Joint Technology Group (JTG), bilateral Maritime Security Dialogue, Industrial Security Summit and the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative.

In the past decade, after years of hesitation India signed three major foundational agreements enabling closer defense cooperation with the United States. They are:

Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA): Established in 2016, LEMOA allows the military of either country to use the other’s bases for resupply and repair, enhancing logistical cooperation.

Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA): Signed in 2018, COMCASA enables secure communication and information exchange on approved equipment during bilateral and multinational training exercises and operations.

Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA): Signed in 2020, BECA permits the exchange of unclassified and controlled unclassified geospatial products, topographical, nautical, and aeronautical data, products, and services between India and the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA).

In 2016, the United States also designated India as a Major Defense Partner. Two years later India was elevated to Strategic Trade Authorization tier-1 status, which allows India to receive license-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the Department of Commerce.

Since 2008, India has bought US defense platforms and equipment worth nearly \$ 20 billion dollars, propelling the United States among the top three defense suppliers

to India along with Russia and Israel. These defense sales are facilitated through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) processes. For the past 10 years, the Indian military does the highest number of joint exercises with the American armed forces. The scope and complexity of these exercises have been enlarged over the years. Important bilateral exercises that the two countries do together involves, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Special Forces. Furthermore, in 2019, India and the US did their first-ever trilateral exercise, Tiger Triumph, involving all three-armed forces on either side. Three years ago, India has also joined the multilateral Combined Maritime Force (CMF) based in Bahrain, as an Associate Partner.

Already, the Indian armed forces are major users of large US origin platforms such as C-130J, C-17 transport aircraft, P8I maritime reconnaissance, anti-submarine aircraft, Apache, Chinook, and MH60R helicopters. In 2024, India signed a nearly \$3 billion contract to buy 31 Predator Drones manufactured by US Company General Atomics. India is the only non-treaty partner to get these Unmanned Aerial Systems covered under the Missile Technology Control Regime, category-1 arrangement.

Yet, there are concerns in the Indian establishment about a tendency in American system to withhold or delay transfer of key technology to India. The supply of F-404 aircraft engines, manufactured by General Electric and meant to power India's Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas MK1A, has been delayed by over two years creating a critical gap in the Indian Air Force (IAF) fighter jet inventory. The proposed agreement between State-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), India's only aerospace company and GE for supply of the more powerful F-414 aircraft engine meant for the upgraded Tejas Mark 2, is yet to be finalized despite commitment from the White House in June 2023 to transfer up to 80 per cent design and manufacturing technology.

In another instance, there is a distinct feeling in the Indian military that President Joe Biden's administration deliberately withheld the delivery of six AH-64E Apache attack helicopters meant for the Indian Army as a punitive action against India for its 'neutral' stand on the Russia-Ukraine war and various other perceived diplomatic indiscretions by India. These episodes create

enough doubts in the minds of the Indian decision-makers about long-term American intentions.

The road ahead under the new administration may get rockier since Trump will push hard to increase military sales and will likely judge India by the quantum of military hardware it buys from the United States. This is where it gets tricky for New Delhi. For various historical and regulatory issues, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has been reluctant to buy American fighter jets. One of them is the fear that the Pentagon imposes severe restrictions in the use of the combat jets, impinging on India's decision-making sovereignty. In the previous decade a multi-country, multi-vendor contest to buy 126 fighter jets did not go the American way and India ended up buying two squadrons of Rafale combat jets from France in 2016.

Now, as the IAF looks to procure another 110 multi-role fighter aircraft, two US fighter jets—the F-21 and F-15EX—are in the contest alright but there is a distinct possibility that India may go in for purchase of another tranche of the Rafale fighters from France, given that the IAF is already operating 36 of them and the fact that the Indian Navy is on the verge of finalizing the deal to buy 26 marine Rafale fighter jets for its indigenously designed and manufactured aircraft carrier INS Vikrant.

Then there is the matter of choosing an advanced jet engine (with a desired thrust of 110kN) for India's proposed 5<sup>th</sup> Generation Advanced Medium Combat Jet (AMCA) fighter. US, France and possibly UK companies—GE, Safran and Rolls Royce respectively—are in a contest to co-develop and co-manufacture these engines for the 5<sup>th</sup>-generation fighter jet programme in India. All these factors will test the India-US defense relationship soon in the context of the current geopolitical quicksand.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*