

Nirmala Sitharaman to chart course for India-US tri-service military exercise

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NEW DELHI: Days after the apex Japan-India-America (JAI) tri-lateral meeting on Indo-Pacific on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires, defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be visiting the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii to review military-to-military relations and chart the course for the first ever India-US tri-service military exercise off in Bay of Bengal in May-June, 2019. Defence minister Sitharaman left for Washington on Saturday night.

According to Indian and US diplomats familiar with the agenda of her visit, Sitharaman will be meeting her US counterpart James Mattis on December 3 to follow-up on the tri-lateral meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Donald Trump and Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe and prepare grounds for sharing of information in the Indo-Pacific theatre

through the secure COMCASA network. India recently signed a deal allowing it to become part of this network. With Japan, the US, Australia, and India all flying the P-8I anti-submarine surveillance aircraft, the Indo-Pacific theatre has become transparent for the QUAD grouping (of which these four countries are part) also as military information can now be exchanged through the secure network. This new network will be put to test during the tri-service amphibious exercise off the Indian seaboard next summer with all elements of Indo-Pacific command participating with their respective Indian military elements.

Senior government officials told Hindustan Times that Sitharaman will be interacting with key defence officials, thinkers and strategists on the west coast where she will be meeting a select group at Stanford university with former US National Security Advisor HR McMaster being the host. US Defence Secre-



■ Nirmala Sitharaman

tary Mattis is also part of this network. She will also be visiting the highly rated Defence Innovation Unit (DIUx) in California in a bid to link Indian defence start-ups with this unit which aims to explore synergies between innovative US private sector firms and the Pentagon on latest technologies.

This will be largely funded by venture capital with Indian government providing the seed money. The main idea behind visiting DIUx is to understand the potential of constant technological upgrades achieved

through research by private sector.

Sitharaman will be hosted by Admiral Phillip S Davidson, the top commander of all US armed forces in Indo-Pacific at Hawaii on December 6. The Minister's visit to Hawaii is to recognize the American

effort to redefine and expand the strategic region in consultation with India. Simply put, the new definition gives India bigger play in the military affairs of the region with Japan and Australia being the other ends of the strategic grouping. The minister will also review the military to military exercises planned in future and discuss the strategic environment in the region with China in the focus.

During her meeting with Secretary Mattis at Pentagon, Sitharaman will also be exploring the acquisition of high-end military technologies for India such as the Predator-B hunter killer drone and reviewing the joint working groups on aircraft carriers and aircraft engines.