

theirview

US needs to understand India-Russia defence ties

One cannot overemphasize how destructive Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act would be for the US-India relationship

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Twenty years ago, India tested five nuclear bombs at Pokhran, triggering US sanctions. India is facing a similar situation today due to the US' Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (Caatsa). If imposed, these sanctions would have severe negative consequences for the US-India defence relationship. To understand why, it is imperative to delve into the historical growth of the Indian Armed Forces and India's relationships with its various partners.

Following India's independence, the legacy equipment with the Indian Armed Forces was British. Over time, India reduced its reliance on British weapons and started to procure its defence systems from the USSR, France, Germany, Italy, Israel and others, with the erstwhile Soviet Union eventually becoming the primary supplier.

The first major deal between India and the USSR was the MiG 21 fighter aircraft in the early 1960s. Since then, Soviet equipment in the Indian Armed Forces has continued to grow. Russia has leased a nuclear submarine, Chakra, to India and has helped India build its own. Even today, warships are being procured from Russia and missiles being co-developed. Talks for procuring Ka-226 helicopters and S-400 are in progress.

Apart from the defence relationship, India has had a longstanding relationship with Russia/the Soviet Union. India signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in August 1971. Russia has been the strongest advocate of India becoming a permanent member of UN Security Council.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 caused a severe interruption of support for military equipment procured from the Soviet Union. India realized that over-dependence on one nation is problematic and decided to diversify by procuring from multiple sources. There was also a strong desire to be self-sufficient. Since then, India has reduced its reliance on Russian inventory from more than 75% of arms imports to approximately 68% today, most of which is obsolete.

When the US imposed sanctions on India in 1998, Nato (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) countries refused to return Indian military equipment that was sent for maintenance and overhaul. This left an indelible and inherent fear of procuring military hardware from the West. France did not adhere to the sanctions and continued to support helicopters, Mirage 2000 aircraft and other weapons and sensors supplied to India. This is one of the reasons that India was comfortable procuring Scorpene submarines and Rafale fighters from France.

Fortunately, the sanctions did not last long and, as India emerged as one of the largest importers of military hardware, many countries wanted a piece of the pie. After the tsunami in 2004, India was looking to purchase an amphibious ship for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The US was quick to respond by offering the USS Trenton—the first warship that India purchased from that country. The deals that have followed include aircrafts (P-8I, C-130J and C-17), howitzers (M-777) and helicopters (Apache and Chinook). The trade in military hardware has been around \$16 billion since 2007. Further, major sales to India—including the F-16 and F/A 18 fighter aircraft and Sea-Guardian unmanned aerial vehicles—have been pre-approved by the US government.

Many other strategic engagements have been initiated, like the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI). A US legislation now deems India a "major defence partner". And then there is the formation and deepening of the "Quad" along with Japan and Australia. The US, India and Japan have already been engaging in a trilateral maritime exercise, "Malabar", since 2002. Many enabling agreements between the US and India have been on the table. With the Lemoa (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) signed, talks for Comcasa (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) and Beca (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) are in progress.

While it appears that the defence relationship is progressing satisfactorily, there have been challenges on both sides. Issues in the Indian procurement process like offsets, transfer of technology (ToT) and protracted timelines are proving to be deterrents for the



US manufacturers. India has its own versions of problems with the US regarding offsets, ToT, and licensing. However, despite the challenges, the relationship was flourishing, until Caatsa came into effect. Under Caatsa, sanctions can be imposed on countries that engage in "significant transactions" with any of 39 Russian companies. With 68% Russian inventory, India can ill-afford to break off from Russia. The Indian Armed Forces are dependent on Russia for various joint ventures to continue operating, supply of spares, maintenance repair and overhaul, and upgrades. The Caatsa issue arises because India wants to buy S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia to counter the S-400 of China. Washington fears that its own technology would be compromised if it co-exists with Russia's S-400s.

One cannot overemphasize how destructive Caatsa would be for the US-India relationship. The multitude of defence engagements established over the past decade will be lost. India would lose a trusted friend and would likely not make future defence purchases for a long time. For the US, the stakes may be even higher. The US would lose India's trust at a time when India is actually warming up to it, and the memory of the 1998 sanctions was beginning to fade. Washington must realize that while India has started to wean itself from Russian military equipment, this will take time. India will probably never completely cease all purchases from Russia. There is bipartisan support in the US Congress and in many US quarters to find a Caatsa fix, as evidenced by the testimony of the US secretaries of defence and state.

With the US-India two-plus-two ministerial dialogue scheduled for early July, hopefully some bilateral agreement will be announced between the two largest democracies. This will ensure that the bridges that have taken so long to build are not burned and they continue to provide security in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

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