

DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEET

Sitharaman, US's Mattis to meet today

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NEW DELHI: Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will meet her US counterpart James Mattis on Friday, on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus in Singapore to discuss the impact of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) on New Delhi's decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile system this month. She may also discuss the fallout on India on the US sanctions on Iran that kick in on November 4.

Diplomats based in New Delhi and Singapore told Hindustan Times that while the two defence ministers will discuss the entire gamut of bilateral defence ties including the change of government in Maldives and the Indo-Pacific region, the spotlight will be on the Trump administration's reaction to the S-400 system purchase by India, a deal closed during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to the country on October 5. The ADMM plus



■ Nirmala Sitharaman and US counterpart James Mattis

will be attended by 18 Defence Ministers of the region. Most will likely express their concerns over the rise of Chinese military presence in the Indo-Pacific region and its impact on sea lanes of communication.

Although it is not clear whether Secretary Mattis will be part of the Trump administration when Sitharaman goes to Washington in December, she is expected to reinforce India's position on why it qualifies for a CAATSA waiver on S-400 and also should be exempted by sanctions on the import of Iranian oil. India needs to press its case on Iranian oil imports as China has already cut down 50% of its imports from Tehran despite publicly claiming that not a drop

of oil imports from Iran will be cut. The only issue on S 400 is the technical aspects which India is already discussing with US. This pertains to the sharing of radar signatures of US aerial platforms in service with the Indian Air Force. The Indian position on the S-400 system purchase is strong as the deal pre-dates the CAATSA Act and the country's requirement is urgent after China acquired the same system from Russia. Even if New Delhi had decided to go in for an American alternative to S-400, South Block officials argue, it would have taken a minimum of five years of gestation period before the first surface to air missile system was installed on Indian soil.

On Iranian oil imports, India has already cut down its imports from Tehran to 1.5 million tons per month from well over two million tons per month in 2017. This has been done despite the fact that none of the oil producing countries barring Nigeria have started pumping more crude into the market and the international price has gone up by 20% since the US announced sanctions on Iran

earlier this year. With US oil production only slated to go up by mid-2019 and India not interested from importing oil from Venezuela, the Modi government has no options but to keep up imports from Iran as there is no compensation from any other country including Saudi Arabia, UAE or Russia. On the trade deficit with the US, India has already made efforts to reduce the number from a high of \$25 billion in 2016 to \$23 billion this year by importing nearly \$4 billion worth of oil and other commodities. Indian interlocutors have made it known to their US counterparts that while New Delhi will not be able to do commodity specific imports, it will compensate by importing other goods so that the trade deficit declines. "Given that the clock has started ticking on general elections, India cannot import only those goods which the US wants to export due to lobbies. However, India at best will compensate by importing other goods," said a senior official who asked not to be named.

Defence Minister Sitharaman will be in Singapore for two days.