

India-US Defence Trade Continuity Under Trump

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ABSTRACT This brief explores the factors informing the Donald Trump administration's continuity on the US's defence trade with India. The administration's impetus to maintain US-India defence trade stems from factors like the 'reverse revolving door' policy that has increased the influence of US defence contractors, its 'Buy American' policy to boost US arms exports, and defence trade being construed as an incremental means to correct the bilateral trade imbalance. Further, in the Trump administration's attempt to iron out policy divergences with India over the Indo-Pacific construct, this brief notes an evolving focus on Indian maritime surveillance capability in US-India defence trade. Given India's interest in guarding against rising Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean, the brief makes recommendations for New Delhi to actualise gains.

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INTRODUCTION

In the years since Donald Trump's election as US president, his administration's conduct of foreign policy continues to confound with its contradictory actions. For instance, while declaring an era of has renewed "great power competition" with China and Russia,¹ the administration has reneged on the US's traditional role of agenda-setting at multilateral fora, berated allies and partners, and ceded the defence of democratic values. These actions have counterintuitively damaged its standing in the world and, in some cases, has translated to an increase in Chinese and Russian influence.

Similarly, on India, Trump has in large parts upended the 'Carter *mantra*', which directed past US administrations to prioritise strategic convergences and prevent differences on avenues like market-access from "crowding out minimal-yet-positive developments."² The Trump administration has brought trade differences out in the open. As negotiations for a renewed "fair and reciprocal"³ trading arrangement have stalled, the administration has levied steel and aluminium tariffs,⁴ revoked India's benefits under the Generalised System of Preferences programme,⁵ contemplated limiting Indians' H1-B visas quota to 15 percent over divergences on e-commerce policy,⁶ and has threatened a Section 301 investigation into India's tariff/non-tariff barriers.⁷ However, as big-ticket announcements have continually stalled (like the finalisation of a partial US-India trade deal) and nascent divergences have emerged (like over e-commerce regulations), the Trump administration has, in some ways, also adhered to the Carter *mantra*. In giving bilateral

strategic ties a fillip, the administration has pursued its institutionalisation by inking force interoperability agreements and has spurred a shift from an overt dependence on the chemistry between the top political leadership by instituting ministerial-level consultation platforms.

The Trump administration inherited an encouraging trajectory on defence trade with India; bilateral defence trade increased from less than US\$1 billion in 2008 to US\$18 billion in 2019.⁸ US arms exports to India recorded an "over 550% growth in 2013-17 compared with the previous five years," making it India's second-largest arms supplier.⁹ On this front, the Trump administration has mostly kept its transactional impulses at bay by not only continuing arms transfers finalised under previous administrations but also paving the way for more focused sales. Before identifying the emergent trends, this brief underscores the Trump administration's motivations behind pursuing continuity on defence trade with India.

CONTINUITY AND BEYOND UNDER TRUMP

The push for defence trade under the bilateral dynamic is not new. Even the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement, which formally ended any remnants of the Cold War-era estrangement between India and US, included a defence trade component. With India poised to become a major weapons importer in the coming years, the US sought an early entry into India's largely Russia-dominated arms market. As one US Congressman put it, "it's 123 for 126," referring to the 123 Agreement, which tacitly recognised India's nuclear

programme, and the 126 fighter jets that the US was hoping India would eventually acquire from it.¹⁰ Over time, however, this transactional prospect lost steam as the George W. Bush administration faced graver roadblocks to the negotiations, such as the nearing stalemate on the civil nuclear liability clause, Bush's second term fast coming to a close, and domestic opposition in India holding a sword over the deal's ratification.

Defence trade is often viewed as a core component of American foreign relations, and the US currently dominates global arms sales. As of 2018, 43 of the top 100 weapons producers in the world were US companies, accounting for 59 percent of all arms sales.¹¹ These firms enjoy substantial influence in US foreign policy decision-making via the "high-profile revolving-door hires" of executive branch officials, retired Pentagon servicemen, Congressmen and even legislative staff members.

The Trump administration has spurred the further elevation of defence trade through the "reverse revolving door," where defence sector executives are tapped for high-profile government roles.¹² Former Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, for instance, was a senior vice president at Boeing before joining the Trump administration as deputy defense secretary in 2017. During his tenure

as Acting Defense Secretary, he was briefly investigated by the Pentagon's Office of Inspector General for promoting his former employer and putting "his finger on the scale" to primarily push for the US Air Force's procurement of Boeing's F-15X fighter jet.¹³

Further, US arms exports have increased under the administration's 'Buy American' plan, which eases the process of arms sales. Following the announcement in 2017 of a largescale US arms modernisation programme contributing to a rise in domestic procurements by the Pentagon, the State Department announced the Conventional Arms Transfer policy to reverse the "perception that the State Department is a frequent site of logjams in the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) process."¹⁴ This involves encouraging the Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) track for arms export over FMS processes—which are open to lengthy pre- and post-sale clearance and Congressional oversight (often dependent on human rights considerations). This move even complied with the Trump administration's 'America first' worldview, which former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson defined as divorcing foreign policy from US values and advocacy of human rights.¹⁵

At the same time, the US push for DCS often translates into a strain on the budgets of purchasers like India, as direct company-to-nation arms transfers permit defence

Table 1: Total US arms FMS clearances under Trump

Fiscal year	2016 (Obama final year)	2017	2018	2019
Total in US\$ billion	33.60	41.93	55.66	55.40

Sources: Defence Security Cooperation Agency (November 2016,¹⁶ November 2017,¹⁷ October 2018,¹⁸ October 2019¹⁹)

manufacturers to hike their margins. Hence, with the announcement of the 'Buy American' plan, the shares of the US's five biggest defence contractors—Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, General Dynamics and Northrop Grumman—breached their all-time highs, after already having more than tripled over the 2013-18 period. The push for this policy was considerable, with one senior Trump administration official saying, "We want to see those guys, the commercial and military attaches [in US diplomatic missions],

unfettered to be salesmen for this stuff, to be promoters."²⁰ As a result, US arms exports have seen substantial year-on-year gains. In reporting its earnings for 2019, the US Defence Security Cooperation Agency hailed the three-year average of US\$51 billion as "demonstrating continued strength in the sales of U.S. defense articles and services to allies and foreign partners."²¹ This excludes DCS figures, which in the fiscal year 2018 was up 13 percent over 2017 numbers, netting US contractors about US\$192.3 billion.²²

Table 2: Major developments in US-India defence trade

Sr. no	Year of finalisation	Platform/Equipment	x	To be/already inducted in	Reported cost (rounded in US\$ billion)
1	2008	Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes	6	Indian Air Force	1
2	2009	P8I Poseidon Long Range Maritime Patrol and Anti-Submarine aircraft	8	Indian Navy	2.1
3	2010	AGM-84L Harpoon Block II missiles	24	Indian Air Force	0.170
4	2011	C-17 Globemaster-III transport aircraft	10	Indian Air Force	4.1
5	2011	MK-54 all-up-round lightweight torpedoes	32	Indian Navy	0.086
6	2012	Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes	6	Indian Air Force	1
7	2012	AGM-84L Harpoon Block II missiles	21	Indian Air Force	0.200
8	2015	AH-64E Apache helicopters	22	Indian Air Force	2.1
9	2015	CH-47F (I) Chinook helicopters	15	Indian Air Force	0.900
10	2016	M777 Howitzer guns	145	Indian Army	0.732

11	2016	Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes	1	Indian Air Force	0.134
12	2016	P8I Poseidon Long Range Maritime Patrol and Anti-Submarine aircraft	4	Indian Navy	1.1
13	2019	Sig Sauer Assault Rifles	72,400	Indian Army	0.090
14	2020	AH-64E Apache helicopters	6	Indian Army	0.930
15	2020	MH-60 Romeo Seahawk helicopters	24	Indian Navy	2.1

Sources: *The Wall Street Journal* (June 2011²³), *The Print* (December 2019,²⁴ February 2020²⁵), *Economic Times* (September 2010,²⁶ July 2011,²⁷ June 2011,²⁸ July 2012,²⁹ February 19³⁰), *The Diplomat* (October 2016,³¹ June 2019³²), *Hindustan Times* (December 2019³³), US Embassy in India (December 2016³⁴), *Defence World* (August 2016³⁵), *Deccan Herald* (February 2020^{36,37})

With India, the Trump administration has overseen the completion of deals finalised during the Obama administration, such as the 2015 sale of AH-64E Apache helicopters, and yielded to long-standing Indian requests for particular platforms, such as the recently finalised deal for MH-60 Romeo Seahawk helicopters. The administration has also followed through on establishment recommendations to ‘front-load’ licences and clearances ahead of Indian Request for Proposals.³⁸ In some cases, this has involved wielding US executive authority (such as overruling the Obama administration’s freeze³⁹ on India’s acquisition of US-made unmanned systems), to make India “the first non-treaty partner to be offered a MTCR Category-1 Unmanned Aerial System, the Sea Guardian UAS manufactured by General Atomics.”⁴⁰ Similarly, even as Congressional directives on arms export designations for India make their way through Capitol Hill’s arduous processes, the Trump administration, in its executive capacity, has already enacted specific classifications. For instance, the US accorded India the Strategic Trade

Authorisation-1 (STA-1) status through a federal notification, making it the third Asian country after Japan and South Korea to have that status.⁴¹

Further, there is a political dimension informing defence trade. In general, Trump has claimed that the increase in global US arms sales has meant more industrial manufacturing jobs in the US, a key pledge of his presidential campaign. While renegotiating trade pacts, the Trump administration is pushing for increased defence trade to correct trade imbalances. For instance, ahead of the renewed US-Japan trade arrangement, Trump urged Japan to increase its arms imports to balance bilateral trade.⁴² Consequently, with its order of 147 F-35 fighters, Japan became the biggest international buyer of the Lockheed Martin-made jet.⁴³

Apart from rising energy imports and the purchase of civilian aircraft, New Delhi has touted defence trade to be a primary force behind its efforts to dampen India’s trade surplus with the US. For US trade negotiators

seeking market access reforms, India construing trade tensions as merely a matter of addressing the trade imbalance has been frustrating.⁴⁴ But Trump has continued to promote defence sales even as trade negotiations have continually stalled. For instance, while his maiden visit to India in February 2020 did not see the conclusion of a partial trade agreement or any other significant deliverable, Trump repeatedly touted the US\$3 billion deal for the AH-64E Apache helicopters and MH-60 Romeo Seahawk helicopters signed during the visit,⁴⁵ and also doing so to appeal to the sizeable and influential Indian-American community.⁴⁶

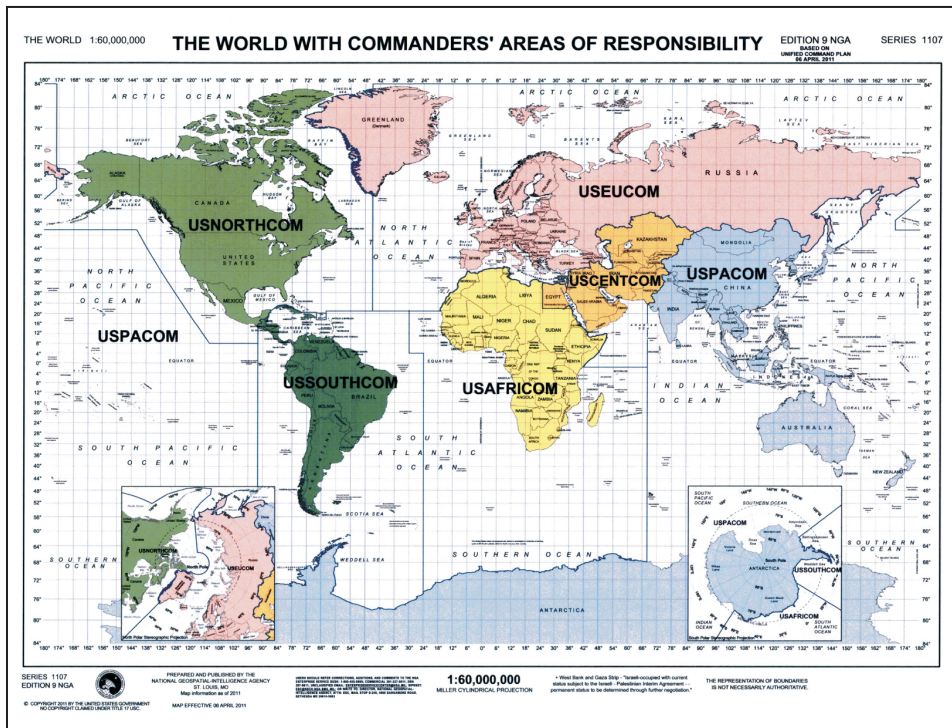
The Trump administration's push for US arms exports to India is also in line with the security establishment's agenda on Russia and China. The US is attempting to reduce India's historical dependence on Russian weaponry. Even as Russia overtook the UK as the second-largest global arms exporter in 2018,⁴⁷ its dominance in the Indian market reduced. Russia "was the largest supplier to India in 2010-14 and 2015-19, but deliveries fell by 47 per cent, and its share of total Indian arms imports went from 72 to 56 per cent."⁴⁸ Whereas, US interests on China do not pertain to its inroads into the Indian market even as it has expanded its arms export "customer base to 53 countries in 2014-18, up from 41 in the previous five years."⁴⁹ The Trump administration's incentive to push for more significant defence trade with India pertains to the US security establishment's long-term plan to oversee India's emergence as a goods provider in the Indian Ocean region and, consequently, greater integration into the Indo-Pacific security calculus.

FIXING THE US APPROACH TO CULTIVATING INDIA'S MARITIME RISE

In cultivating India's maritime rise as a goods provider in the Indian Ocean region, the Trump administration has pursued the ironing out of divergences between Indian and American outlooks on the Indo-Pacific.

Long before an American political consensus on courting India emerged in the post-Cold War era, the US security establishment viewed India as a "balancer" to China. Origins of the nascent US policies of the "pivot", or "rebalance"⁵⁰, to the Asia-Pacific, are evident in the post-Second World War make-up of US combatant commands, under which, the Hawaii-based Pacific Command (PACOM) oversaw "about half the earth's surface, stretching from the waters off the west coast of the U.S. to the western border of India, and from Antarctica to the North Pole... The 36 nations comprising the Asia-Pacific region are home to more than 50% of the world's population, 3,000 different languages, several of the world's largest militaries, and five nations allied with the U.S. through mutual defense treaties."⁵¹ Interestingly, India—hardly a Pacific power—was not designated under the purview of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Instead, India and China came under PACOM, with its jurisdiction ending along the India-Pakistan border.

With the renaming of PACOM to the Indo-Pacific Command and the concurrent symbolism of India's prominence in the Indo-Pacific,⁵² the Trump administration formalised the US security establishment's



Source: https://archive.defense.gov/news/UCP_2011_Map4.pdf

operational view of the Indian and Pacific oceans’ interlinked destinies.

However, divergences remain at the policy level. US interests as per the Indo-Pacific calculus dictates an India whose strategic focus must increasingly be eastward. But this has largely been impeded by India’s westward interests—the centrality of West Asian countries in India’s energy security, that region also being a considerably significant source of remittances, and security concerns over cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. These westward interests hindering ties with the US is most evident in India’s repeated refusal (since 2002) to post an Indian liaison officer at PACOM.⁵³

Under Trump, the encouraging trajectory of US-India bilateral energy ties is seen as a credible replacement to India’s West Asian energy dependence. Since raising the spectre of US secondary sanctions on India’s energy

imports from Iran,⁵⁴ US energy exports to India have been on path to increase by 40 percent to breach US\$10 billion in financial year 2020.⁵⁵

The Trump administration has also overseen India’s posting of a liaison officer at the US Navy component (NAVCENT) of the US Central Command. Headquartered in Bahrain, India’s military attaché at its embassy in Bahrain now doubles up as its liaison officer at NAVCENT.⁵⁶ This development is crucial as India had previously refused to post an officer in Hawaii until it could first do so at CENTCOM.⁵⁷ The Modi government is now reportedly considering heeding to US requests to post an Indian naval liaison officer at the American combatant command in Hawaii.⁵⁸

The Trump administration has also operationalised the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement for mutual access to offshore bases (inked under the

Obama administration), and has continued to support India's transport aircraft fleet. In 2019, the State Department cleared follow-on support packages worth US\$670 million for India's fleet of C-17 Globemaster heavy-lift transport aircraft,⁵⁹ which were used extensively in the evacuation of Indians from war-torn Yemen.

Recognising India's westward interests, the Trump administration has also sought to

recalibrate the strategic construct at the policy level. At the Raisina Dialogue 2020, US Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger announced that the Indo-Pacific construct would now stretch up to the eastern coast of the African continent ("stretching from California to Kilimanjaro"⁶⁰). India viewed this as the US's belated recognition of the North-Western Indian Ocean region's strategic relevance under the Indo-Pacific construct.

Table 3: Upcoming developments—US-India defence trade

Sr. no	Year of clearance	Platform/Equipment	x	Procurement cleared /sanctioned by	Reported cost (rounded in US\$ billion)
1	2020	AGM-84L Harpoon Block II missiles	10	DSCA, US State Dept.	0.092
2	2020	MK 54 All Up Round Lightweight Torpedoes	16	DSCA, US State Dept.	0.063
3	2020	MQ-9 Reaper or Predator-B High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) drone	10/30	Acceptance of Necessity by DAC awaited	3
4	2020	Integrated Air Defense Weapon System (IADWS) and Related Equipment and Support	1	DSCA, US State Dept.	1.8
5	2019	MK 45 5 inch/62 caliber (MOD 4) naval guns and related equipment	13	DSCA, US State Dept.	1
6	2019	P8I Poseidon Long Range Maritime Patrol and Anti-Submarine aircraft	6	DAC, Indian Ministry of Defence	1.5
7	2019	777 Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) Self-Protection Suites (SPS)	2	DSCA, US State Dept.	0.190

Sources: Defence Security Cooperation Agency (April 2020,⁶¹ February 2020,⁶² April 2020,⁶³ November 2019,⁶⁴ February 2019⁶⁵), Financial Express (February 2020⁶⁶), India Today (November 2019⁶⁷)

With these changes, the Trump administration has sought to amend the US's approach of encouraging heightened Indian maritime activity. The goal of seeing India's rise as a goods provider in the Indian Ocean region has been towards helping the US "share the burden" by reducing "the strain on U.S. forces" deployed in the Western Pacific,⁶⁸ a line of thinking that was also prevalent in the Obama administration. Former US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, for instance, identified India as the "linchpin" of the US policy of rebalance/pivot to Asia,⁶⁹ and oversaw India's graduation from an observer (2004-10) at the Rim of the Pacific Exercise to a full participant from 2012 onwards.⁷⁰ The distinction, however, is that the Trump administration has sought this by first instituting a focus on Indian maritime surveillance capability (platforms and ancillary equipment) in US-India defence trade, since a capable maritime surveillance apparatus that enhances India's maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean region will be a precursor to the country emerging as a regional goods provider.

With the Trump administration clearing the sale of the MH-60 Romeo Seahawk utility maritime helicopters, which the Indian Navy had been seeking for nearly a decade,⁷¹ the focus on India's maritime capabilities is clear. As per its front-loading policy, the administration has cleared MK 45 5 inch/62 calibre anti-surface naval guns. It has also cleared MK 54 Torpedoes and AGM-84L Harpoon missiles, both of which are needed to enhance the capability of India's P-8 aircraft fleet to conduct "anti-surface warfare missions in defense of critical sea lanes while

enhancing interoperability with the United States and other allied forces."⁷²

This US support for Indian maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean region has long been reciprocated from the Indian side. The Indian Navy, for instance, was the "first international customer" for the P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft, with the 2009 deal of eight aircraft worth about US\$2.1 billion.⁷³ With additional procurements in 2016, India became the largest international operator of the P-8 aircraft.⁷⁴ That year, India also sought a contract modification with the US for the Harpoon missiles that were being operated by the Indian Air Force, but deployed for the Indian Navy's necessities on its growing P8 maritime patrol and anti-submarine aircraft fleet. Under an US\$81 million contract, the Pentagon directed Boeing to supply "12 UGM-84L Harpoon Block II missiles and 10 UTM-84L Harpoon training missiles, all encapsulated in a container to enable submerged launch through a torpedo tube."⁷⁵ This was towards the Indian Navy's midlife upgrade of two *Shishumar*-class (Type 209/1500) diesel-electric attack submarines (SSK), to enhance India's anti-ship warfare capabilities.

India is now set to procure six more P-8 aircraft from the US.⁷⁶ Also, following the clearance of unmanned combat aerial vehicles, India was expected to buy ten drones each for its three branches of armed forces. But this may be downsized given the Indian Air Forces' plan to upgrade the in-service Israeli Heron Drones and the Indian Army's commitment to the indigenous project on Rustom 2 drones by the Defence Research and Development Organisation. India is now likely to opt for ten

Sea Guardian drones (the naval variant of the cleared Predator-B drones), which the Indian Navy has been seeking for “joint surveillance and intelligence sharing.”⁷⁷

This emergent focus in US-India defence trade is compatible with the US’s long-term interests over India’s maritime role and India’s immediate interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The focus on maritime surveillance capability in US-India defence trade to increase India’s maritime domain awareness has served as a crucial precursor to the larger aim of India’s emergence as a goods provider in the Indian Ocean region. India is set to serve as the hub for maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean region by hosting liaison officers from nearly 40 countries at the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR),⁷⁸ which was launched in December 2018 to “engage with partner nations and multinational maritime constructs to develop comprehensive maritime domain awareness and share information on vessels of interest.”⁷⁹ The centre is gradually emerging as the preeminent example of India’s evolving role as a goods provider in the Indian Ocean region, with India’s burgeoning fleet of P-8 aircraft at the forefront of IFC-IOR’s intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance efforts.

India’s enhanced maritime surveillance capability has been pivotal in identifying rising Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean. According to India’s Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Karambir Singh, seven or eight Chinese ships are usually present in the region at any point of time under varying guises, such

as anti-piracy escorts, research vessels or deep sea mining exploratory vessels.⁸⁰ Moreover, improved surveillance capability has also proven to be useful in domains beyond India’s maritime considerations. For instance, India’s Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat revealed that the P-8 aircraft fleet was also deployed during the stand-off with China in Doklam in 2017.⁸¹

Given the centrality of such US-made maritime surveillance platforms and its ancillaries in India’s interests of guarding against rising Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean and the northern high-plains, two key recommendations should be considered for the better actualisation of this emergent focus in US-India defence trade.

Graduate offset obligations beyond tactical transport aircrafts

Under India’s Defence Procurement Procedures, offset obligation towards import of arms platforms are seen as a “short-term trigger to create a sustainable eco-system for defence production” and as “helping shape the development of the Indian defence industry.”⁸² They are also relevant towards the actualisation of the US-India Defence Technology and Trade Initiative, which seeks to elevate US-India defence trade from a traditional “buyer-seller” dynamic to one of co-production and co-development.⁸³

Following India’s large purchase orders of air-lift transport aircraft such as Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes and CH-47F (I) Chinook helicopters, a robust precedent has been set for US-India defence production partnership. In 2019, Tata

Lockheed Martin Aerostructures Limited became the “single global source of C-130J empennage assemblies,” delivering its 100th C-130J Super Hercules empennage from its facility in Hyderabad.⁸⁴ Similarly, in addition to seeing through India’s order of 15 CH-47 Chinook helicopters, in 2017, Boeing also began manufacturing CH-47 Chinook Crown and Tailcones for the US Army’s fleet and Boeing’s international customers in partnership with Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL).⁸⁵ Over time, this even fed other industrial engagement programmes, such as Boeing and TASL delivering Apache attack helicopter fuselages for global customers, Dynamatic Technologies manufacturing ramp and pylons for the global production of Chinook helicopters, and Hindustan Aeronautics manufacturing gun bay doors for F/A-18 Super Hornet.⁸⁶

At the same time, offset obligations in maritime surveillance aircraft has run into trouble. On India’s purchase of the P-8 platform, Boeing has failed to fulfil its “offset obligations of \$641 million till date, despite the contract specifying that all obligations had to be fulfilled by August 2016.” Since being given “an extension of the ‘period of performance’ till December 2020 to provide all necessary documents to prove it carried out the offsets,”⁸⁷ the US and India have inked the Industrial Security Annex (ISA) and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which facilitates the safe transfer of sensitive technologies.

Upon resolution of the alleged inconsistency of Boeing fulfilling its offsets worth “a minimum of 30 percent of the total value” of the contract inked,⁸⁸ New Delhi

should graduate US-India industrial engagement programmes beyond hardware for transport aircraft. Moreover, under the ISA and COMCASA safeguards, a future order for more P-8s could be complemented with the technology transfer of the aircraft’s Telephonics APS-143 OceanEye aft radar system, which is exclusively available aboard Indian variants.⁸⁹

Sustain pragmatism over Indian dependence on Russian platforms

Despite developing a burgeoning fleet of surveillance platforms like the P-8 aircraft, placing purchase orders for ASW helicopters like the MH-60 Romeo Seahawk and soon-to-be acquired UAVs like the Sea Guardian drone, India will face an increased anti-submarine warfare challenge. China will have over 70 submarines by the end of this year, outnumbering India by a 4:1 ratio.⁹⁰ The challenge will be compounded on the north-western frontier of the Indian Ocean with Islamabad looking to acquire Yuan-class diesel-electric submarines from Beijing. Given the US’s tight restrictions on the export of submarines, India will continue to be dependent on Russia for the nuclear-powered INS Chakra and Sindhughosh Kilo-class submarines currently in service, and the prospective purchase of three more Kilo-class submarines.⁹¹

Although the Trump administration has kept its transactional impulses at bay by continuing arms transfers finalised under the Obama administration and paving the way for more focused sales, India’s dependence on Russian arms is the only aspect that has witnessed a degree of US transactionalism.

India's purchase of the S-400 missile defence systems raised the spectre of sanctions, even though the US Congress issued waiver provisions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for India, Vietnam and Indonesia—three countries seen as over-dependent on Russian weaponry, and hence befitting of some leeway to reverse course. With authority to enact CAATSA waivers resting with the president, US officials at one point hinted at India receiving the exemption if the US-made F-16 won the Indian Air Force's procurement round for 114 fighter jets.⁹²

Instead, India has sought to dampen the situation by also looking to purchase the US-made National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System-II (NASAMS-II). Sustaining this policy, however, is not cheap. The US State Department cleared the NASAMS-II with a price tag of US\$1.867 billion, far exceeding the Indian Defence Acquisition Council's approved rate of around US\$1 billion.⁹³ Thus, India needs to ramp up engagement with Congressional members of the House Caucus on India and Indian Americans and the Senate India Caucus to exact a formalised arrangement that accords New Delhi reasonable paths to wean itself off Russian weaponry.

CONCLUSION

Barring the transactionalism witnessed in the US's attempt to reduce Russia's dominance in the Indian arms market, US-India defence trade has been furthered as the most stable component of the bilateral trajectory under Trump. Moreover, the emergent focus on Indian maritime surveillance capability in the

Trump administration's view of US-India defence trade is a welcome development given India's own interests in the Indian Ocean region.

Going forward, with the gains made over US defence manufactures' offset obligations towards India's purchase of US-made airlift transport platforms, maritime surveillance aircraft can be the next domain of heightened US-India industrial engagement programmes. Moreover, this could be central in India overseeing the belated actualisation of the US-India Defence Technology and Trade Initiative, which would truly realise the potential of bilateral defence co-production and co-development.

However, these positive prospects will only hold if the recent push in US-India defence trade continues beyond the current presidential tenure. Recently, the US bipartisan consensus on support for India and bilateral ties has come under strain due to India's abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir and the passage of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act. Down the line, this could impede US-India defence trade as Democrats increasingly insist on linking US arms exports to moral imperatives. On the other hand, Republicans, under the 'America First' mandate, seek to delink values from US foreign policy matters.

New Delhi must work with like-minded legislators in the US Congress to seek the formalisation of its US arms export designations, such as the STA-1 and Major Defence Partner, which were enacted with executive authority ahead of their grounding in American legislative precedents. This

would ensure that those designations are not overturned with a simple 'stroke of the pen' by a future US administration that may

prioritise its critique of India's internal matters over bipartisanship on US-India defence trade. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

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