

Trump Intensifies India's Arms Conundrum

Written by Sarosh Bana

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SAROSH BANA, FEB 27 2025

US president Donald Trump gained the high ground in forcefully pitching to visiting Indian prime minister Narendra Modi Lockheed Martin's fifth generation F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter, among a host of other American military equipment. After his meeting with Modi, Trump said the US would be increasing military sales to India and is "paving the way to ultimately provide India with the F-35 stealth fighters". Driven by his MAGA (Make America Great Again) agenda, the President expressed his resolve during his meeting with the Prime Minister at the White House on 13 February to expand overall US exports to India in order to bridge, if not overcome, the \$36.8 billion trade deficit – the 10th largest deficit the US has in bilateral trade.

With exports to the US at \$77.5 billion, and imports worth a relatively modest \$40.7 billion in the two-way trade worth \$118.2 billion in 2023-24, India had a trade surplus of \$36.8 billion over the US, its largest trading partner. Though the US has sold nearly \$15 billion worth of arms to India in the past seven years, according to Foreign Military Sales (FMS) notifications data compiled by Forum on the Arms Trade, Trump wants Modi to pivot his government's defence spending to the US, away from Russia. "Since 2008, about 62% of India's defence imports (by value) have come from Russia," noted last December's 'In Focus' report of the US's Congressional Research Service (CRS).

However, the US's arms sales to India are through FMS and Direct Commercial Sales (DMS) processes, which do not show up in standard bilateral trade statistics as they are considered more "security assistance" than commercial transactions. The governments besides directly undertake these sales with political and strategic considerations that go beyond simple market dynamics. If they had formed part of standard trade figures, the US's trade deficit with India would have been proportionately less.

Citing India as the world's largest weapons importer by value, accounting for a tenth of global arms imports from 2008 to 2023, CRS's 'In Focus' foresees New Delhi spending "at least \$200 billion in the coming decade to modernise its armed forces". It adds, "The US government is actively encouraging India to reduce its dependence on Russian-origin defence articles." The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates the US's share in India's arms imports to have risen from 8% to 13% between 2009 and 2023, while Russia's to have shrunk by more than half over that period, from 76% to 36%. There were also media reports on 14 February about the stalling of a 2022 \$2.2 billion dollar deal between India and Russia for MiG-29 and Su-30 MKI fighter jets.

The Joint Statement following the Modi-Trump meeting said India would hasten the procurement of six additional Boeing P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft to enhance its maritime surveillance reach in the Indian Ocean Region. Both sides also welcomed "the significant integration of US-origin defence items into India's inventory to date", including Boeing's P-8I, C-17 Globemaster III military transport aircraft, tandem-rotor helicopter CH-47F Chinook and twin-turboshaft attack helicopter AH-64E Apache, Lockheed's C-130J Super Hercules military transport, and MH-60R Seahawk multi-mission helicopter, McDonnell Douglas Harpoon all-weather, over-the-horizon, anti-ship missile, and General Atomics MQ-9B SkyGuardian weaponised drone.

India's opposition and political and defence analysts have time and again censured the Prime Minister for facilitating the US and other developed countries to forge largely transactional ties with India and secure remunerative deals from him. They have also criticised him for not heeding his own clarion call of "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Hindi for "Self-reliant India") coined in 2020, despite India's having a tried and tested military industry capable of checking the

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country's dependence on imports. They particularly denounced his consideration of Trump's pitch for the F-35, which the latter's administration itself has questioned. Trump-anointed "special government employee" Elon Musk who helms the newly-created DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency), has often disparaged the fighter, his rhetoric reaching a high point when he said, "Some US weapons systems are good, albeit overpriced, but please, in the name of all that is holy, let us stop the worst military value for money in history that is the F-35 program!"

The US Comptroller General-headed Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted in its April 2024 report, *F-35 Sustainment: Costs Continue to Rise While Planned Use and Availability Have Decreased*, that the F-35 is the Department of Defense's (DOD's) "most ambitious and costly weapon system and its most advanced fighter aircraft". "DOD's projected costs to sustain the F-35 fleet keep increasing—from \$1.1 trillion in 2018 to \$1.58 trillion in 2023," the report adds. Musk's DOGE has been tasked to trim the Pentagon's \$850 billion budget, which Trump believes can well be halved if the US, China, and Russia were to reach some kind of deal. It appears unlikely the impulsive President and Musk's rhetoric will terminate the F-35 programme, as the fifth-generation fighter that is said to be the most advanced such warplane at present is the choice of the US and 19 of its allies, including many NATO countries, Israel, Japan, Australia, Singapore and South Korea. A thousand F-35s are operating with these countries, and if Trump manages to bag a lucrative deal with India, it would even more help keep the F-35 production lines running.

In the Indian context, defence procurements, and their timing, are largely a political decision made by the top leadership who pulls rank over the military hierarchy that would expectedly premise its requirements on defence and security considerations, and follow a careful selection procedure. One cannot help but recall one of India's most secretive – and questionable – military contracts when, during his 2015 visit to France, Prime Minister Modi unexpectedly finalised the purchase of 36 Rafale multi-role jetfighters from France's Dassault Aviation for €7.87 billion. None in his Cabinet, including then Defence minister Manohar Parrikar, had been aware of this proposal. Modi had not even included Parrikar in his entourage, having taken instead bankrupted industrialist Anil Ambani, who just a fortnight earlier had incorporated a company called Reliance Defence Limited that Dassault selected as its offsets partner for the deal, ignoring the credentials of India's 84-year-old state-owned defence major, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). Then French Prime Minister Francois Hollande was later quoted as saying that the French side had no choice in the selection, as Reliance had been recommended by India.

The Indian Air Force (IAF), whose squadrons (18 fighters in each) have dwindled to 31 from a sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons, had been heartened by the previous Congress-headed government's 2012 defence deal worth \$22 billion (including lifecycle costs) for 126 of Dassault's medium multirole combat aircraft (MMRCA). Modi's 2015 deal had annulled this contract. Though India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri termed Trump's pitch for the F-35 "a proposal, with no formal process under way", his assertion was belied by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal's announcement on 17 February that he "held a meeting with a delegation led by Mr. Michael Williamson, president at Lockheed Martin International". Lockheed had besides showcased its F-35 at the Aero India show held in Bengaluru from 10 to 14 February.

Showcased alongside was Russia's most advanced warplane that it has offered for the IAF, its first fifth-generation multirole stealth fighter, Sukhoi Su-57. In a news conference during Aero India, a spokesman of Russia's public sector defence exports company Rosoboronexport said his company has offered technology transfer for HAL to licence produce the export version, Su-57E. "We propose to localise the production of the fifth-generation fighter aircraft in India, and the production at HAL can begin as soon as this year," he said. Rosoboronexport has additionally offered assistance for India's indigenous Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) project, which includes technology transfers related to key components such as engines, Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radars, optics, artificial intelligence, software, and advanced weapons.

The F-35's tightly-controlled proprietary cutting-edge technologies precludes the possibility of the US's offering joint production of the fighter. This and the excessive lifetime costs are, however, not the only deterrents for India that will also have to contend with the fact that neither the F-35's data link may be compatible with India's Integrated Air Command & Control System (IACCS), nor its radio communications equipment with India's Russian-origin communication suites. The F-35's design may moreover reportedly not allow it to use air-to-air refuelling, which is currently configured for the Russian Il-78 in the IAF.

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A primary question is whether the F-35 can be integrated into the current IAF structure that largely caters to the Russian Sukhois and MiGs, the French Mirages and Rafales and the Indian Tejas that would be highly incompatible for an American fighter. If India makes a deal for the F-35, this would be the first American fighter in the IAF fleet. Inducting the F-35 would necessitate significant changes in logistics, maintenance and support system, as also completely specialised training for the pilots and ground support.

The GAO report makes some telling revelations: "Yet DOD plans to fly the F-35 less than originally estimated, partly because of reliability issues with the aircraft. The F-35 fleet's overall availability has trended downward considerably over the past 5 years, and none of the variants of the aircraft (i.e., the F-35A, F-35B, and F-35C) is meeting availability goals." With a top speed of Mach 2 and a range of 1,900km, the comparatively newer twin-engine Su-57 is largely untested in operational deployments outside Russia, with Algeria its sole foreign customer hitherto. The widely operational single-engine F-35 has a top speed of Mach 1.6 and a combat range of 1,500km, and has superior technology and intelligence gathering capabilities.

Even though Rostec (Russian Technologies State Corporation) has provided only a rough cost estimate of the Su-57, analysts have deduced the potential cost of a jointly produced Su-57 from India's indigenous production of other Russian fighters like the Su-30MKI and arrived at an estimate of around \$75 million per unit, if mass produced and considering India's far cheaper labour and material prices. However, if India were to reject the F-35 offer, Trump may thwart it from settling for the Su-57 through punitive action. His administration could well invoke the Counter American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) against India, as Rosoboronexport has been under US sanctions since July 2014.

About the author:

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