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Modi-Trump Summit: India's Arms Conundrum

By Sarosh Bana

SYNOPSIS

India faces a Hobson's choice in deciding whether to opt for the fifth-generation F-35 stealth fighter the US is offering or Moscow's more attractively-packaged offer of its first-ever fifth-generation stealth fighter, the Sukhoi-57. Declining Trump's proposal will likely prompt him to invoke punitive sanctions against New Delhi that could jeopardise its Su-57 option.

COMMENTARY

US President Donald Trump gained the high ground in forcefully pitching to visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi Lockheed Martin's exorbitant fifth-generation F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter, among 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 single-point 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 US\$36.8 billion trade deficit his country is saddled with the Asian economy, the 10th largest deficit the US has in bilateral trade.

With exports to the US at US\$77.5 billion and imports worth a relatively modest US\$40.7 billion in the two-way trade worth US\$118.2 billion in 2023-24, India had a trade surplus of US\$36.8 billion over the US, its largest trading partner.

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.

Modi's Exorbitant Procurements

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, CH 47F Chinook tandem-rotor helicopter, AH-64E Apache twin-turboshaft attack helicopter, Lockheed's C 130J Super Hercules military transport, 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 tried-and-tested military industry capable of checking the 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 jet, 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!”

F-35 Stealth Fighter: Pentagon's Most Expensive Weapons Programme

After including the expenses to develop, manufacture, operate, and maintain an eventual fleet of F-35s, the Defense Department estimates that this – the Pentagon's most expensive weapons programme ever – will cost US\$1.8 trillion over the fighter's total service life, with per-unit costs ranging between US\$80 million and \$110 million. Weaponry would result in cost overruns.

Musk's DOGE has been tasked with trimming the Pentagon's US\$850 billion budget, which Trump believes can be halved if the US, China, and Russia were to reach a deal.

It is unlikely that the impulsive President and Musk's rhetoric will terminate the F-35 programme, as the fifth-generation fighter, which 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 in use or being acquired by these countries, and if Trump manages to bag a lucrative deal with India, it will help keep the F-35 production lines running even more.

Modi's Rafale Deal Set a Worrying Precedent

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, which would expect to premise its requirements on defence and security considerations and follow a careful selection procedure. One often-cited example was the announcement during a visit to France by PM Modi in 2015 of a purchase of 36 Rafale jet fighters from France Dassault Aviation for €7.87 billion (US\$8.17 billion), which caught many in the Indian defence establishment by surprise.

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 US\$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 underway", his assertion was belied by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal's announcement on 17 February that he "held a meeting with a delegation led by Michael Williamson, President at Lockheed Martin International". Lockheed had also showcased its F-35 at the Aero India show 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 Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (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.

No Joint Production of the F-35

There is little possibility that the US could offer joint production of the F-35, which would involve the transfer of its tightly controlled proprietary, cutting-edge technologies. However, this and the high lifetime costs are not the only deterrents for India. These 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. Reportedly, the F-35's design may not allow air-to-air refuelling, which is currently configured for the Russian Il-78 in the IAF.

A primary question is whether the F-35 can be integrated into the current IAF structure, which largely caters to the Russian Sukhois and MiGs, the French Mirages and Rafales, and the Indian Tejas, which would be highly incompatible with an American

fighter. Inducting the F-35 would necessitate significant changes in logistics, maintenance and support systems, as well as completely new training for the pilots and ground support.

But if India were to opt out of any negotiations on the F-35, Trump may thwart it from deciding on the Su-57. The US has strict rules about selling its stealth jets to countries that also use Russian technology, and in 2018, India bought Russia's S-400 missile defence system, which can detect and destroy stealth fighters. Washington can well invoke its Counter American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) against India, as it had done against Turkey, whom it had removed from NATO's F-35 programme after it purchased the S-400, raising US concerns over potential espionage targeting the fighter.

Rosoboronexport has been under US sanctions since July 2014, and Trump could use CAATSA to trip India's Su-57E aspirations.

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