

ISAS Brief

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Tempered Progress as US Defence Secretary Visits India

By Jayant Singh¹

United States Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter, concluded an in-principle agreement to sign a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with India during a three day bilateral visit. The US remains eager to sign two other “foundational agreements” with New Delhi in order to further harmonize the military relationship. India and the US made reference to the South China Sea and took the opportunity to reaffirm support for the India-U.S. Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

On 13th April 2016 the United States Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter, completed a hat-trick of visits to India. During the three day trip Carter visited the Indian Naval Base in Karwar, boarded the Russian built aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya and announced an in-principle agreement to conclude a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with India. Carter’s visit marks the fourth time that he has met with his Indian counterpart, Manohar

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Parrikar, in the last year and is indicative of the robust bilateral defence cooperation that Washington has with New Delhi.

Mixed Signals

In the days and weeks leading up to the Carter visit detractors of the US-India relationship once again found themselves in a position of strength. In a continuation of its “balanced” approach to the region, the Obama administration published a federal notification for the sale of 8 F-16 nuclear capable fighter jets to Pakistan worth US\$ 699 million despite encountering opposition from within the American political establishment. Such American military overtures to Pakistan have been a source of friction between New Delhi and Washington in the past, and once again the decision was met with disappointment from the Indian side. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs such military transfers do not further the counter-terrorism mission of the Pakistani military. Of course what is left unsaid, and is the main cause of concern within *South Block*, is that such US military aid will lead to offensive force modernization and will better situate Pakistan to deal with the conventional military deficit it faces against India.

Periodic setbacks aside, there is a general sense that the strategic relationship is moving in the right direction, albeit not fast enough for some. India and the US participate in an incredible 80 joint working groups and task forces ranging from civil-nuclear energy to aircraft carrier technology. Under the Obama administration, the Pentagon established its first country specific reaction cell; the India Rapid Reaction Cell (IRRC) was launched to deal with the bureaucratic hurdles that were stalling defence cooperation and to boost defence ties through the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI). In a further bi-partisan commitment to its bilateral relationship with India, the U.S.-India Defence Technology and Partnership Act was introduced in the US Congress to institutionalize the US-India defence partnership and elevate India to the same status as America’s allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The act is good news for the DTTI as it would amend the Arms Export Control Act of the US to extend special foreign military sales status to India.²

² See US Congressional website. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/4825>

The three deals

The highlight of the Carter visit remains the in-principle agreement to conclude a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with India. Considered a “foundational agreement” by the Americans, the LEMOA will make it possible for US and Indian troops to exchange logistical support and share each other’s facilities in their respective bases. Although a step in the right direction, the deal underscores the slow and cautious approach that India has undertaken in its relations with the US. Known as the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) in its original iteration, it was first proposed in 2004 but AK Antony, worried about a political fallout and under pressure from the Left Front, balked at signing the agreement. Others argued that sharing supplies, spare parts and services with US troops would compromise India’s non-aligned stance. Negotiations continued under Manohar Parikar, and despite the US offering an India specific LEMOA instead of a pro-forma LSA, New Delhi’s response has been tentative. US officials were disappointed that India did not formally sign the LEMOA and instead went in for an in-principle agreement despite being in agreement on all the clauses.

The LEMOA is one of three “foundational agreements” that the US is eager to sign with New Delhi in order to further harmonize its military relationship with India. It also happens to be the low hanging fruit of the three. The much more complex Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) relates to the transfer of sophisticated communications equipment. In the case of CISMOA both sides have valid concerns and negotiations have yet to reach a conclusion. On the American side, there is apprehension over New Delhi’s age old defence partnership with the Kremlin - the CISMOA safeguards such proprietary US technology from falling into Russian hands.³ Whereas the worry for New Delhi is that US-made CISMOA protected equipment could potentially enable the US to listen in on encrypted communications of the Indian armed forces. The most controversy generating agreement of the three remains the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Information and Services Cooperation (BECA). It would entail placing digital sensors on Indian territory in order to provide the US with high-resolution imagery of the sub-continental landscape. However, given India’s own sophisticated geo-spatial navigation systems and the fact that the US won’t return the favour on South-West Asia, the deal happens to be heavily in favour of the US.

³ Ajay Shukla, “2 Indo-US pacts ready only one likely to be signed”. Available at: http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/2-indo-us-pacts-ready-only-one-likely-to-be-signed-116041100033_1.html

Maritime Security Co-operation

As with all high-level bilateral exchanges between India and the US, both sides took the opportunity to reaffirm support for the India-U.S. Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (JSV). Within this context they agreed to launch a bilateral Maritime Security Dialogue, to be co-chaired by officials at the joint secretary/assistant secretary-level of the Indian Ministries of Defence and External Affairs and the U.S. Departments of Defense and State. Taking its cue from the JSV, the joint statement following the Carter visit made reference to the South China Sea and the importance of freedom of navigation and maritime security in the region.⁴ Despite voicing its support for a rules-based security architecture in the region New Delhi has refrained from adopting too aggressive a stance on the region. Manohar Parrikar was quick to shoot down any talk of joint patrols in the South China Sea when it was raised by Admiral Harry Harris during his recent visit to New Delhi.⁵

For India the priority lies in balancing its expanding partnership with the US without antagonizing China and compromising its relations with Beijing. By exercising its multilateral partnerships New Delhi has displayed its strength in the South China Sea, but by tempering its activities in the region India also hopes to assert its strategic autonomy and highlight that it isn't dancing to anybody else's tune, namely the US. Such a theme would no doubt resonate with the Chinese establishment, who had this to say about Ashton Carter's visit: "India has been upholding independent diplomatic policy. India will make up its diplomatic policies based on its own interests".⁶ A similar sentiment was voiced in a separate statement: "We hope the relevant cooperation is beneficial to regional peace and cooperation and should not be aimed at the interests of third parties".⁷

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⁴ See "India-United States Joint Statement on the visit of Secretary of Defense Carter to India April 10-13, 2016". Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/718589/india-united-states-joint-statement-on-the-visit-of-secretary-of-defense-carter>

⁵ See "Question of joint patrolling with the US does not arise, need to cut the flab from the military: Parrikar". Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/question-of-joint-patrolling-with-the-us-does-not-arise-need-to-cut-the-flab-from-the-military-parrikar/>

⁶ See "China reacts to India-US deal on sharing military logistics". Available at: http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/china-reacts-to-india-us-deal-on-sharing-military-logistics-read-what-it-says_1875816.html

⁷ See "India, U.S. closer to pact to share military logistics: officials". Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-defence-idUSKCN0W10YY>