

CDS STRATEGIC BRIEFING

## Shaping the Future of U.S.-India Defense Cooperation

By Tim Sullivan and Michael Mazza

*If India and the United States are to achieve the level of partnership that defense officials in both countries have pledged to pursue, there may be no better means of doing so than for the Indian Air Force to add 126 U.S. fighters to its arsenal.*

Defense Secretary Robert Gates has said that when he meets with Indian Defense Minister AK Antony this week, the two are likely to discuss India's plans to select a new line of fighters for its growing air fleet.<sup>1</sup> Two U.S. defense firms are bidding American planes (Lockheed Martin's F-16 and Boeing's F/A-18) against four European models in the competition. By indicating that he will raise the issue, the Secretary has demonstrated that the United States has not only a commercial interest in the outcome of the fighter competition, but also—and more importantly—a strategic one as well. Indeed, in facilitating commercial arms sales, the United States can further its own national security objectives.

India and the United States are uniquely suited for strategic partnership. Both harbor growing anxieties about China's increasing military power and regional assertiveness. Both are acutely aware of the threat from Islamist terrorist networks, and share concerns about the effects of violent extremism on the long-term stability of Central and South Asia. And both are robust democracies, concerned first and foremost with ensuring the security and preserving the freedoms of their citizens.

India is also a rising power, eager to develop a military with global reach. This is an ambition that the United States can and should help India realize. Time and again, Secretary Gates has stressed the value the United States stands to derive from assisting allies and partners in developing their military capabilities. "Helping other countries better provide for their own security," he wrote in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year, "will be a key and enduring test of U.S.

global leadership and a critical part of protecting U.S. security, as well."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, building so-called "partnership capacity" not only serves to ease the burdens on a U.S. military with global commitments, but also creates the capacity for building effective, well-integrated coalitions during a time of war.

There may not be a more ideal candidate for such an effort than India. New Delhi has already set its military on a path toward modernization, pledging earlier this year to commit \$30 billion to the campaign by 2012. India's defense budget jumped by nearly 25 percent between 2009 and 2010 alone.<sup>3</sup> If New Delhi is successful in its modernization efforts, India in the coming decades will achieve the capacity, as planned, to a) carry out simultaneous combat operations against Pakistan and China along both land and maritime frontiers, and b) project power throughout the Indian Ocean and perhaps into East Asian waters as well. In an era of ever-increasing wariness

towards growing Chinese power, an Indian military so-enabled would be a welcome development.

Defense cooperation between the United States and India has, encouragingly, increased steadily over the last ten years, with American and Indian forces participating in over 60 joint exercises and military-to-military exchanges since the beginning of the decade.<sup>4</sup> Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently described the military-to-military relationship as “exceptionally strong and growing.”<sup>5</sup>

Starting in 2002, the United States also launched a number of major government-to-government arms sales to India, which have included counter-battery radars, an amphibious transport dock along with six associated helicopters, and six C-130J transport planes.<sup>6</sup> More recently, India has signed an agreement with the United States to purchase 24 Harpoon Block II missiles. The two are also nearing an agreement on the sale of 10 C-17 heavy transport planes—a \$3.5 billion deal which, if finalized, would represent the largest to date between India and the United States.<sup>7</sup>

U.S. firms are also grappling for a share of the burgeoning Indian defense market by way of Direct Commercial Sales, as seen not only in the current fighter competition, but also in India’s contract with Boeing to procure eight P8-I Multi-mission Maritime Aircraft. The United States’ decision not only to clear the P8 for export to India but also, and for the first time, to allow export of the new aircraft at the same time the U.S. military receives its first delivery, has gone a long way in demonstrating U.S. commitment to the relationship. India is the first foreign customer for the P8; stalwart allies like Australia and the U.K., which have expressed interest in the plane, have yet to ink contracts.<sup>8</sup>

The increasing volume of U.S. Foreign Military Sales and Direct Commercial Sales to India is an important development, as are the counterterrorism cooperation measures implemented in the wake of the Mumbai attacks. But the United States has a long way to go before it unseats India’s primary arms provider—Russia. India is Russia’s top arms buyer and is expected to

remain so for at least the next four years.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that 70 percent of India’s defense equipment is Russian-supplied;<sup>10</sup> nearly all of India’s existing fighter fleet is Russian-made.

Yet India’s defense trade with Russia is a vestige of India’s Cold War strategic alignment, sustained out of habit, convenience, and perceived cost savings. New Delhi will have to ask itself, however, whether this is a partnership it wants to maintain in the years ahead—or whether there is greater value to be had in increasing its defense-industrial ties with the United States.

Who better to broach such a subject than Secretary Gates? It will be imperative for the Defense Secretary to articulate to his counterpart this week the strategic dividends that stand to accrue from an expanded Indian defense partnership with the United States—and specifically from the selection of an American fighter in the Indian Air Force’s current bidding competition.

Take the issue of interoperability, for example, which is made far easier when two militaries employ the same equipment. Of the countries that fly the other fighters in the competition, which is India most likely to fight alongside in a coalition anytime soon? Sweden, which flies the Gripen? It’s doubtful. France, which flies the Rafale? Not likely. At the same time, India has more overlapping security interests with the United States than it does with Russia or any countries in Europe. Sure, India has deep and enduring historical ties with the United Kingdom (a builder and operator of the Eurofighter Typhoon), but how likely is London to involve itself in a struggle over the Asian balance of power? Only the United States and its Asian allies have shared interests with India in this regard; the greater the interoperability between the U.S. and Indian armed services, therefore, the better prepared they will be in the case of future contingencies.

What’s more, should the fighter competition conclude in the United States’ favor, it has the potential to open the door to greater, more high-stakes defense-industrial cooperation down the road. In the years ahead, once the Indian Air Force has settled on its new medium multi-role

combat aircraft (or MMRCA, as the as-yet selected fighter is known), it will likely set its sights on acquiring a more advanced, 5<sup>th</sup>-generation aircraft—like the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), perhaps, for which the Indian Navy has already submitted a Request for Information.<sup>11</sup> The U.S.-led F-35 program is already dependent upon a network of international partners, and has thus been touted as much for its built-in coalition (and exportability) as for its combat capability.

As with the MMRCA, the U.S. stands to gain as much from India's access to the F-35 as its partner does. The F-35 is not only the world's most capable ground-attack fighter, but, thanks to its sophisticated sensor packages, it can achieve remarkable situational awareness, and is capable of quickly and easily sharing information with other systems in the air, on the ground, and at sea. In the event of a future conflict involving the United States and its coalition partners, F-35s would make significant contributions to the formation of a comprehensive allied picture of the battlespace. Operating Russian-made fighters, this is a picture India would not see; nor could it contribute as effectively to allied situational awareness.

But the opportunity to enroll India in the JSF coalition may already be slipping away: India and Russia have reportedly reached a preliminary agreement to collaborate in the development of a 5<sup>th</sup>-generation fighter that could compete with the United States' F-22, another next-generation jet.<sup>12</sup> And while it is true that it may be a decade or more before India incorporates a 5<sup>th</sup>-generation fighter into its air fleet, the United States must begin competing with Russia now if Washington wants that fighter to be the F-35.

The United States has much to offer the Indians beyond fighter aircraft, of course. The Aegis missile defense system or interceptors like the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) would make good strategic sense, given China's ballooning missile arsenal. Not only would such sales enhance India's capability to defend itself, but as with the F-35, would enhance

India's capacity for combined missile defense missions with others in the region; South Korea, Japan, and Australia all operate Aegis destroyers or will do so in the future.

Indeed, there are signs that India would like to better integrate itself into the U.S.-led security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. India has pursued defense cooperation of various kinds with Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, all important U.S. defense partners and all, with the possible exception of Japan, future F-35 operators. Washington should encourage such cooperation and should facilitate it by easing and supporting the export of defense articles to India.

Any serious expansion of U.S. arms cooperation with India will require the U.S. to tackle a bevy of export control challenges. While New Delhi insists that the U.S.-Indian relationship is unique and that India deserves special treatment, Washington will be hard pressed to make exceptions for India on strict regulations to which even America's oldest and closest allies are bound. Indian officials remain skeptical of any arrangement that they believe impinges on Indian sovereignty; the United States, meanwhile, will remain committed to scrutinizing the use of high-tech weaponry sold to India as long as Delhi maintains close defense-industrial ties with Moscow. In other words, both sides will need to find common ground on a variety of export control and defense trade issues if they are to develop a truly robust defense-industrial relationship.

Growing U.S. defense trade with India—in the form of both Foreign Military and Direct Commercial Sales—provides a new opportunity for Washington to further its strategic ends in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. Secretary of Defense Gates seems to recognize this. When he meets with Antony this week, he should work to convince the Indian defense minister that buying American in the MMRCA competition is in India's best interests. Making the hard sell—that is in America's best interests.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "US wants to expand military ties with India, eyes fighter deal," *Economic Times*, September 24, 2010, available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics/nation/US-wants-to-expand-military-ties-with-India-eyes-fighter-deal/articleshow/6619133.cms> (accessed September 26, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Helping Others Defend Themselves: The Future of U.S. Security Assistance," *Foreign Affairs*, 89:3 (2010): 6.

<sup>3</sup> Agence France-Presse, "India Unveils \$32B Defense Budget," *Defense News*, February 26, 2010, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4516565> (accessed on September 26, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> "Military pacts on hold but India, US continue with exercises, arms deals," *The Times of India*, September 22, 2010, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Military-pacts-on-hold-but-India-US-continue-with-exercises-arms-deals/articleshow/6601777.cms> (accessed on September 26, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> "US wants to expand military ties with India, eyes fighter deal," *Economic Times*, September 24, 2010, available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics/nation/US-wants-to-expand-military-ties-with-India-eyes-fighter-deal/articleshow/6619133.cms> (accessed September 26, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt, "India-U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, RL33529 January 30, 2009, 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> "India signs deal for Harpoon Block II missiles with US," *The Economic Times*, September 2, 2010, available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics/nation/India-signs-deal-for-Harpoon-Block-II-missiles-with-US/articleshow/6477810.cms> (accessed on September 27, 2010); Agence France-Presse, "Biggest India-U.S. Defense Deal Set To Be Signed," *Defense News*, September 22, 2010, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4786841&mp;c=AIR&s=TOP> (accessed on September 26, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Gulshan Luthra, "Indian Navy buys 8 Boeing P8-I for \$2.1+ billion," *India Strategic*, January 2009, available at <http://www.indiastrategic.in/topstories220.htm> (accessed on September 26, 2010); Boeing, "P-8A Poseidon," available at <http://www.boeing.com/defense-space/military/p8a/index.html> (accessed on September 26, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Nabi Abdullaev, "India Set for 4-Year Run as Russia's Top Customer," *Defense News*, September 15, 2010, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4777899&mp;c=policy;%20air;%20land&mp;s=TOP> (accessed on September 26, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Prakash Nanda, "Russia still key ally for India," UPI Asia, March 23, 2010, available at [http://www.upiasia.com/Politics/2010/03/23/russia\\_still\\_key\\_ally\\_for\\_india/5258/](http://www.upiasia.com/Politics/2010/03/23/russia_still_key_ally_for_india/5258/) (accessed on September 27, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> "Lockheed to offer fifth generation F-35 fighters to Navy," *The Times of India*, July 28, 2010, available at: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Lockheed-to-offer-fifth-generation-F-35-fighters-to-Navy/articleshow/6102973.cms> (accessed September 27, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Nanda, "Russia still key ally for India."