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## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# US Defence Secretary's Visit to India

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**In his first two-day official visit to India from September 25-27, 2017, US Defence Secretary James Mattis met with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and held delegation level talks with Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.**



The visit to India came in the shadow of some important major developments:

1. Post the unveiling of President Trump's Afghan strategy.
2. In wake of the rise of tensions between US and North Korea.
3. Post the 72 day long stand-off between India and China.
4. The UN Security Council meeting where India accused Pakistan of harbouring terrorism, and
5. As the Indian army took part in a two-week joint military training exercise in the United States from September 14-27, 2017 to forge closer ties on counter-insurgency, and regional security operations.<sup>1</sup>

India has been designated as an important strategic partner by the US. Coming at the heels of the announcement of President Trump's policy towards Afghanistan and South Asia in August 2017, the visit by US Defence Secretary can be read as another step to deepen the already substantial defence and strategic relations between both the countries.

Agendas such as purchase of fighter jets, drone deals, shared concerns over Afghanistan's security, defence trade and technology, collaboration between defence industries, and sharing of most advanced defence technologies dominated the visit. The visit also accentuated on several other defence and

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<sup>1</sup> "US Defence Minister James Mattis to Meet PM Narendra Modi and Nirmala Sitharaman Today; Fighter Jets, Drone Deal on Table," *AFP, News 18*, September 26, 2017, <http://www.news18.com/news/india/fighter-jets-drones-on-table-as-pentagon-chief-jim-mattis-heads-to-india-1526619.html>

strategic agreements under Modi's 'Make in India' campaign. The agreements pave way for the US to provide more joint military exercises and sale of high-tech defence equipment to India and to develop new institutional mechanisms to elevate the status of India-US defence relationship.<sup>2</sup> American companies Boeing and Lockheed Martin have also offered to assemble F-18 and F-16 fighter planes in India post their purchase.<sup>3</sup> These initiatives will add up to India's profile as a valued partner while extending its strategic interests well beyond the South Asian region to the Korean Peninsula.

US also offered India to buy the most upgraded version of the Lockheed Martin's F-16 Block 70 aircraft in a deal potentially worth \$15 billion,<sup>4</sup> and a \$2 billion sale that could see the Indian Navy acquire the world's most advanced maritime reconnaissance Sea Guardian drones.<sup>5</sup> India showed keenness to acquire more advanced Avenger armed drone, a high-speed multi-mission Remotely Piloted Aircraft which can carry out time-sensitive strike missions over land or sea, a proposal for which was discussed with US earlier this year.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the already existing foundational agreements between both the countries, the Pentagon is looking for some India-specific documentation that would address India's concerns and meet the Congressional-mandated legislative requirements for further improving the sale of defence equipment.<sup>7</sup>

Both the US and India believe in a common maritime security threat in the Indo-Pacific due to the increasing footprint of China. The Indian Navy is of the view that the Chinese presence in the Indian

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<sup>2</sup> "James Mattis' India visit aimed at taking Indo-US defence ties to next level," The Indian Express, September 24, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/james-mattis-india-visit-aimed-at-taking-indo-us-defence-ties-to-next-level-4858715/>

<sup>3</sup> James Mattis' India visit aimed at taking Indo-US defence ties to next level," The Indian Express, September 24, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/james-mattis-india-visit-aimed-at-taking-indo-us-defence-ties-to-next-level-4858715/>

<sup>4</sup> "US Defence Minister James Mattis to Meet PM Narendra Modi and Nirmala Sitharaman Today; Fighter Jets, Drone Deal on Table," AFP, News 18, September 26, 2017, <http://www.news18.com/news/india/fighter-jets-drones-on-table-as-pentagon-chief-jim-mattis-heads-to-india-1526619.html>

<sup>5</sup> Vishnu Som, "With Eye On China, India May Buy 'Unarmed' Guardian Drone From US," NDTV, September 24, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/with-eye-on-china-india-may-buy-unarmed-guardian-drone-from-us-1754437>

<sup>6</sup> Vishnu Som, "With Eye On China, India May Buy 'Unarmed' Guardian Drone From US," NDTV, September 24, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/with-eye-on-china-india-may-buy-unarmed-guardian-drone-from-us-1754437>

<sup>7</sup> "James Mattis' India visit aimed at taking Indo-US defence ties to next level," The Indian Express, September 24, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/james-mattis-india-visit-aimed-at-taking-indo-us-defence-ties-to-next-level-4858715/>

Ocean has less to do with the armed Somali pirates, and more to do with Beijing's elaborate plans to strategically encircle India by establishing ports and military facilities.<sup>8</sup> To prepare itself, India is eagerly looking to speed up its engagement with the US Pacific Command based in Hawaii to counter China's apparent militarisation of the South China Sea. It is also setting up tri-services command in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.<sup>9</sup>

The visit also de-hyphenates India completely from Pakistan, and steps up India's role as a global strategic partner for the US, as well as expands its periphery in Afghanistan. The talks between Defence Secretary Mattis and his Indian counterpart Nirmala Sitharaman covered ways to enhance and complement efforts to restore security in Afghanistan. India has agreed to enhance its efforts to train Afghan soldiers in counter-terrorism and help build its police forces as Washington steps up its own military campaign against the Taliban insurgents who have gained ground in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> Expanded role of Indian military is also under consideration to provide expertise in supporting the US-led training and advisory mission with Afghan security forces.<sup>11</sup>

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs described Pyongyang's ballistic missile programme and nuclear proliferation links as posing a grave threat to India's security and international peace and decided to ban all trade with North Korea. Until recently, India has been one of North Korea's biggest trading partners, which it halted in April following the UN sanctions, but more importantly, due to US administration urge to isolate Pyongyang.<sup>12</sup> As the Trump Administration has made containing North Korean belligerence its chief foreign policy priority in the recent months, Indian policymakers hope that cooperation with the United States against the DPRK could cause Washington to reciprocate with a harsher stance toward

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<sup>8</sup> Vishnu Som, "With Eye On China, India May Buy 'Unarmed' Guardian Drone From US," NDTV, September 24, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/with-eye-on-china-india-may-buy-unarmed-guardian-drone-from-us-1754437>

<sup>9</sup> Shishir Gupta, "US defence secy James Mattis' India visit likely from Sept 25," Hindustan Times, August 24, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/us-defence-secy-james-mattis-india-visit-likely-from-sept-25/story-35r61K6foCboozcHmb8FsN.html>

<sup>10</sup> Nirmala George, "Mattis: US wants to resolve N. Korea standoff diplomatically," Fox News, September 26, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/09/26/us-defense-chief-mattis-visits-india-reviews-honor-guard.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/09/24/mattis-to-visit-india-drones-fighter-jets-on-table.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ivana Kottasová and Sugam Pokharel, "North Korea cut off by 3rd biggest trading partner," CNN Money, May 1, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/01/news/north-korea-india-trade-ban/index.html>

Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, India's policy shift on North Korea will help Modi strengthen India's relations with United States, increasing New Delhi's diplomatic profile and access to foreign investment.<sup>14</sup> US has also hinted about India's ability to be a broker, if US and North Korea agrees for talks, as it has a reputation for being non-aligned with an independent foreign policy. Hence, it can play the role of a pathfinder, seeking common ground and enhancing trust and understanding between opposing parties.<sup>15</sup>

India at the moment is completely in sync with US strategic and defence ambitions in the region and beyond. India has manoeuvred with the US against Pakistan and China, while blaming the former for all its ills. It has become the US sidekick in pursuing its policies of which South Asia is one component. For long, US has been pushing India to take on a more active role in Southeast Asia with its "Look East" policy.<sup>16</sup> US weapons transfers to India aim at bolstering Indian capabilities to develop a counterweight against China's growing assertiveness in recent years. Whatever the rhetoric that comes out of Washington and Delhi, countering China and pressurising Pakistan remains the top agenda of India and the US. This is evident from India's demand to purchase at least 100 single-engine fighters to counter the growing air threat posed by China and Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Ramani, "India's U-Turn on North Korea Policy," *The Diplomat*, July 19, 2017  
<http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/indias-u-turn-on-north-korea-policy/>

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Ramani, "India's U-Turn on North Korea Policy," *The Diplomat*, July 19, 2017  
<http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/indias-u-turn-on-north-korea-policy/>

<sup>15</sup> Maj Gen Harsha Kakar, "India can help diffuse North Korea crisis," *Indian Defence Review*, September 26, 2017,

<http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/india-can-help-diffuse-north-korea-crisis/>

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Roche, "James Mattis's India visit: 5 key issues to watch out for," *Live Mint*, September 26, 2017,  
<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/oPrYh7WvDwvphGzpxjB8wL/James-Mattis-India-visit-5-key-issues-to-watch-out-for.html>

<sup>17</sup> "US Defence Minister James Mattis to Meet PM Narendra Modi and Nirmala Sitharaman Today; Fighter Jets, Drone Deal on Table," *AFP, News 18*, September 26, 2017,  
<http://www.news18.com/news/india/fighter-jets-drones-on-table-as-pentagon-chief-jim-mattis-heads-to-india-1526619.html>