

## **Chuck Hagel's India visit: Not quite a success story**

**Vivek Mishra August 28, 2014**

### **Executive Summary**

*Coming on the heels of the US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit, the US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's visit to India might have carried the political and diplomatic significance of a 'second-in-a-row' high level visit from the US to India but eschewed the commensurate conversion of that sentiment into defence deals.*

Amidst substantial speculations about the nature of the visit, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visited India from August 07-09 this year. The visit's purpose remained shrouded in uncertainty even as conflicting views about the intended purpose of the visit was debated among strategic circles. While India expected the signing of military deals, at least those that have been in the pipeline since the earlier government in New Delhi, what added to the confusion was the Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby's clarification that, "the purpose of this trip is to nurture the relationship and not to ink any deal." The Pentagon's reasoning was that the visit was aimed at "nurturing" ties with India after the formation of the new government in New Delhi. At the same time the Pentagon also stressed on the importance of Hagel's visit by saying that Defence Secretary Hagel attached a very "high priority" to the India-U.S. defence ties.

### **The Visit**

Hagel's visit, therefore, demands assessment on two levels; diplomatic and defence deals. The visit scored high on the diplomatic front as the defense secretary met India's Prime Minister, Defence Minister Arun Jaitley, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and the National Security Advisor Ajit K Doval. The visit followed soon after the US Secretary of State John Kerry visited India for the annual US-India strategic talks, which is reckoned to have done the necessary groundwork for providing momentum to the almost stalled Indo-US defence relationship. Two high level visits from the US to India after the change of guard in New Delhi were understandably intended towards regaining the strategic trust lost when bilateral relations plummeted during 2013. The extra mile traversed by the US in its diplomatic efforts through its two consecutive high level visits to India may have more to do with reconciling with an estranged head of the state than anything else. To that extent the US visit diplomacy seems to have succeeded.

### **The Agenda**

The agenda of Hagel's visit to India was clear even before the visit commenced. The US had announced almost two months in prior to Hagel's visit that the US has a number of "ground-breaking" defence technologies, including a helicopter and an unmanned aerial vehicle

programme, to offer to India for co-development and co-production. During Hagel's visit both India and the US focused on converging military and strategic interests in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific. The two countries also discussed their common interests in Afghanistan and ways to strengthen bilateral defence cooperation. With regards to their bilateral defence cooperation, special emphasis was placed on joint military exercises, defence trade, co-production and co-development, research and new technologies. In particular Hagel's meeting with the Indian defence minister led to the initiation of talks on the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), a plan to enhance collaboration in military trade and technologies. The US Secretary of Defence during his visit also pressed for a number of new weapons agreements, including a 'pilot plan' for the two nations to jointly develop next-generation military technologies. Hagel also met with top Indian leaders and business executives and explored plans for the co-development of the anti-tank Javelin missiles, manufactured by Raytheon-Lockheed Martin. Importantly, India and the US also agreed on working towards the extension of the 10-year India-US defence framework.

The US has bagged Indian defence deals worth \$10 billion in the last decade. Although in terms of overall numbers Russia still remains the biggest weapons exporter to India, the US has overtaken Russia as the largest arms supplier to India in the last three years according to [reports](#). What has helped the US pip Russia in arms exports to India is the fact that not only has India become the world's largest importer of arms, it has also diversified its defence needs, thereby roping in many other manufacturing countries like France, Israel and the US. The emphasis by the US during Chuck Hagel's visit on DTTI, often referred as a "stillborn" initiative, can be understood in the context of its newfound euphoria to have emerged as the largest arms supplier to India and the desire to sustain that lead.

### **Assessment**

The US understands well that its edge vis-à-vis arms exports to India, over other supplier countries holds in the area of new, superior technology and innovation. This is in consonance with India's stated priority of "technology" in military imports, as it desires to build a strong defence industrial base. The DTTI is an initiative floated by the US Department of Defense (DoD) which stresses on co-production in five areas and upgrade in defence sector manufacturing. Hagel's visit was opportune for the US for at least two reasons, if not more. For one, the visit provided the opportunity to reset military ties between the two countries after the foundation diplomacy was provided through Secretary of State John Kerry's visit. The other reason was the common emphasis that both the US and India put on "technology" when it came to defence imports and exports. The US through Hagel's visit scooped the DTTI as it generates the same technological conditions for exports as India desires for imports, spelt through its Armed Forces Long-term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP). The LTIPP reflects the vision for the modernisation of the Indian Armed Forces and hence an enhancement of the technologies being used by the armed forces. The document intends to give India an edge by the year 2027 vis-à-vis its neighbours through reliance on technology and information.

The US has sought to meet India's long term military plan through the DTTI, among the primary constituents of which are technology transfer, co-production and co-development. These were the stress points during Chuck Hagel's visit to India. Both the countries agreed on a few arms deal but the Indian government led by its Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised on "technology transfer" and "defence manufacturing in India", which he held crucial to bilateral defence ties between the two countries. This remained central to India's standpoint as India, in the past, has had to face problems in the transfer of technologies from the US in the manufacturing of the Javelin missiles.

However, inhibitions still remain on either side. India is expected to remain sceptical about the US being a long term partner in defence trade, especially high-end technology in the defence sector. The primary reason for India's possible mistrust with the US in this regard will be because of strict export control rules followed by the latter. The US too showed its dissatisfaction with India's below expected rise of FDI in its defence sector (26% to 49%). Hagel's visit to India also did not result in any mega defence deal. The US seems to have failed to convince India to strike military deals or even to persuade New Delhi to convert the defence deals that have been in limbo for some time now. Even the long-pending \$885 million deal with the US government for 145 ultra-light howitzers which was turned down by India for being too expensive could not be renegotiated or turned back. A partial success, however, can be attributed to the two sides having discussed a "pilot plan" to co-produce and co-develop the fourth-generation Javelin ATGMs, manufactured by Raytheon-Lockheed Martin. It remains to be seen if the two countries can come together to share military technologies and overcome past glitches.

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