

US threatens India with sanctions for S-400

By K N Pandita

Defining the Issue

Besides signing a slew of trade and investment deals, Russia, during the 2+2 summit meeting on 6 December in New Delhi, has agreed to continue exporting S-400 missile defence system to India. Reporting the event the *New York Times* wrote, “India’s purchasing of a \$ 5.4 billion missile defence system from Russia, signalled that it was more worried about an emboldened China at its borders than about angering the United States.”¹

The Wire of 20th January 2021 had reported, “Senior US officials told Reuters on January 15 that New Delhi was unlikely to get a waiver over Washington invoking its Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) on the Indian Air Force (IAF) for its S-400 buy. It added that this position was unlikely to change under the incoming US administration headed by President Joe Biden.”² John Kirby, the Pentagon spokesperson said in a press briefing that “the US is very clear with the Indian partners about its concern over this system,”³ The US considers India obtaining S-400 system from Russia as “dangerous”.

The core of the issue is what will be the impact on India and the democratic world if the world’s strongest democracy (the US) decides to impose sanctions on the world’s largest democracy (India) when the latter has the compulsion of bolstering its security against a totalitarian regime.

Background

After illegally grabbing a large part of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir through mercenaries in 1947, Pakistan covets the entire territory of the state on the basis of commonality of religion. Pakistan-based “non-state actors” fighting a proxy war against Indian security forces in Kashmir have become the instrument for spreading Theo-fascism in the region. Pakistan is trying to cover up their brutalities through Goebbelsian propaganda. The comment of the former Pakistani President Ziaul Huq on his ‘Operation Topac’ (Kashmir annexation) plan is revealing; “Pakistan will inflict a thousand cuts on India’s body to bleed it white.”⁴

China is nursing bitter rivalry and malice against India. She believes India is the only rival capable of throwing a challenge to her dominance over the Asian Continent. The biggest threat which China and Pakistan both imagine lying in the rise of India is the latter's deepening democratic dispensation. Therefore, adversaries will do all they can to obstruct India's march to a position of influence. China is obstructing India's claim to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, wrote *The Hindustan Times*.⁵

The alarming situation for India is that China is steadily building its military power. along the LAC in Ladakh region together with introducing a new scheme of setting up border villages along the LAC ⁶. China is also expanding its naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

In the spirit of upholding the Maoist dictum of "enemy's enemy is a friend" China is holding Pakistan in a tight bear hug. The two military-managed states are also familiar to bullying and sword-rattling tactics besides their known aversion to liberal democratic governance. They call themselves "iron brothers"⁷ and are geopolitically engaged in encircling India with the "necklace of pearls" as China puts it.⁸ In response to President Xi's assertion of Sino-Pak relationship as between "Iron Brothers", Pakistan Premier reciprocated saying that his country "staunchly pursues the one-China policy, firmly supports China's stance on such issues of its core interests as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and human rights, and firmly backs the Global Development Initiative proposed by President Xi."⁹

India's assesent

India foresees threat from the Sino-Pak unholy alliance in the background of two possibilities. One is that China has a comprehensive programme of spreading network of road and rail connectivity all along the northern border of India facilitated by Pakistan acquiescing to Beijing's diktat. This endangers India's security. The second is the militarization of the Indian Ocean and stifling of trading channels particularly the narrow but strategic Strait of Malacca through which maxim world trade flows. Both threat perceptions demand that India should become militarily strong to face the double challenge; one on the land and the other on the sea. It is this unavoidable necessity that makes India to prioritise her defence requirements.

Indo-US argument

This brings us to the crux of the problem. Security-wise, India has identified three sectors that need to be converted into bulwark against any foreign aggressive design. These are (a) the Sino-Indian sector from Siachin to Arunachal (b) Indo-Pak border sector from Daulatbeg Oldi in the Karakoram down to Barmer in Rajasthan and (c) the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This means virtually entire land and oceanic border line of India has to be taken care of.

In view of the belligerency of Sino-Pak camaraderie, India has geared up her defence preparedness. She has had defence deals with France, the US, Israel and Russia to procure upgraded military hardware requisitioned by the three defence services.

India has also strategic alliance with the US and is an important component of Indo-Pacific Region. She has also joined the Quad-4 which is an alliance of the US, India, Japan and Australia --- the four principal democracies and also among the stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific. Apart from expanding their trade relations, the Quad-4 are also committed to maintaining the freedom of navigation in the said region. Quad-4 formation had become almost inevitable in view of China's aggressive posturing in the Indian Ocean and SCS. South-East Asian countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, and the Philippines often complain of China encroaching on their sovereign territories and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Chinese war ships move menacingly closer to the Australian shores. Extra-regional countries like India and the United States also have stakes in securing the SCS ---- an endowed ecosystem that is home to rich biodiversity and varied resources, including an estimated 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves, most of which lie along the margins of the South China Sea rather than under disputed islets and reefs; much more are potentially undiscovered.¹⁰

In the background of this security scenario India felt it should have the missile shield like other powerful countries to ensure protection against threats posed by two hostile neighbours. Recently China has given Pakistan the world's largest and the most advanced warship and also upgraded her Gwadar port in the Gulf of Oman. Pakistan has deployed *Nasr* ballistic missile close to the Indian border. India did examine the American and Israeli option¹¹ but ultimately focused on S-400 as the most effective system that met her requirements. The agreement between India and the Russian Federation was signed in 2018 in which Russia agreed to let India have the most powerful missile system called S-400. The delivery has already begun..

The US culls reasons for obstructing the deal. Firstly, the 2017 American law of Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) provides for punitive actions against any country engaged in transactions with Russian defence and intelligence sectors. Secondly, the warnings to Delhi stem from an operational decision to protect its advanced platforms from being technically snooped upon by the S-400. Americans are apprehensive that the "S-400 could gather electronic signatures of US-origin aircraft which India's military operates. These include C-17 and C-130J-30 transport aircraft and AH-64E Apache attack and CH-47F Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, for now," said the US Ambassador in New Delhi.¹² Thirdly, these threats could be Washington's displeasure over the Indian Air Force opting for the S-400 instead of rival systems like Lockheed Martin's Patriot Advanced Capability-3 or PAC-3 or the analogous Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) systems.¹³ And lastly it may be the Americans have a wider goal to penalise Moscow for its wrongdoings in Crimea and Ukraine.

Before discussing the consequences of US' sanctions against India, it has to be said that the Left in India has played a role the freedom struggle. The capitalist world usually considered India as part of the Soviet bloc. They even mistrusted India's claim of championing non-alignment movement. A major part of India's military hardware is of Russian make. Russia twice used her veto power to scuttle anti-India resolutions in the Security Council. No doubt, there was a souring in bilateral relations soon after Russia's debacle in Afghan war and the breaking away of the Central Asian Republics from the Union. But, the bonds between India and Russia are too deep to be disrupted by transient events. President Putin's six hour stay in New Delhi and signing of no fewer than 28 agreements relating to energy, technology, trade and commerce, defence, Afghanistan and a host of matters should give an indication of how much importance Russia attaches to India

Implications

Biden Administration has hinted that sanctions could be imposed on India under the US 2017 Law as in the case of Turkey. The question is will the US run the risk of alienating India at a time when China is challenging her military and economic superiority? There are conflicting views among law makers whether imposition of sanctions on the world's largest democracy by the world's strongest democracy will strengthen the philosophy of democracy? Many

members of the European Union are unhappy over such a decision. In a letter to Biden, Senators Mark Warner of the Democratic Party and John Cornyn of the Republican Party urged the president to grant a national interest waiver to India as provided under CAATSA as this is in America's national security interest.¹⁴

Imposing sanctions means bringing New Delhi under great domestic pressure for parting ways with the Quad-4. Simultaneously, Indo-Pacific security concept also becomes vulnerable. India's withdrawal from Quad-4 will upset the security arrangements of Australia, Japan besides being a major disappointment to the island states of the South China Sea. It will be a temptation for Beijing to fill the vacuum.

It will be a big mistake for Washington to think that India is another Iran. Sanctioning India means a dent in the American strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific and SCS which is likely to give a strong boost to Indo-Russian regional strategic cooperation. The China sponsored Quad-4 (China, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey) will be emboldened and Russia will emerge as the decisive power in the Indian Ocean Region. The South East Asian states like Vietnam, Cambodia, Taiwan, and the Philippines etc. will be forced to revisit their defence strategy and evaluate their options. Realignments of vast scale, if thrust upon the states of SCS, will have far-reaching impact on contemporary world politics. It will rake a debate on the feasibility of democracy as acceptable political philosophy.

Conclusion

At a time when President Biden has invited more than a hundred country heads for discussing ways of strengthening democratic dispensation world over, it will be paradoxical to impose sanctions on India, for the sin of streamlining her defence and security arrangement. As the world's largest democracy India should make a big effort of convincing the American people and their lawmakers that the strength of a democracy lies in allowing it to thrive according to its local ecosystem.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets Russian President Vladimir Putin before a meeting at Hyderabad House on 6 December. | Photo: Praveen Jain | ThePrint

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/asia/india-russia-missile-defense50s-deal.html>

² <https://thewire.in/security/us-india-sanctions-caatsa-s400-russia>

³ DTNEXT, Nov 16, 2021. <https://www.dtnext.in/News/World/2021/11/16154550/1329139/US-expresses-concern-over-delivery-of-Russias-S400-vpf>.

⁴ Gates, Scott, Kaushik Roy (2016). *Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency*. Routledge. pp. Chapter 4. ISBN

⁵ The Hindustan Times, November 19, 2020

⁶ 'Beating the Chinese fait accompli trap' by Ameya Pratap Singh, *The Indian Express*, Dec 13, 2021

⁷ <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-10-26/Xi-Jinping-holds-phone-conversation-with-Pakistani-PM-14FDxvhmJ4k/index.html>

⁸ Indiatimes .com, 22 June 2017. Also see Lintner Bertil (15 April 2019). *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-1-78738-239-8

⁹ News CGTN, 26 October 2021

¹⁰ "South China Sea Energy Exploration and Development", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://amti.csis.org/south-china-sea-energy-exploration-and-development/>^{iv}

¹¹ 'After initial balk, India reconsidering buying Iron Dome' by Haviv Rettig Gur, *The Times of Israel*, 11 July 2013s

¹² The Wire. [/thewire.in/security/us-india-sanctions-caatsa-s400-russia](https://thewire.in/security/us-india-sanctions-caatsa-s400-russia)

¹³ <https://thewire.in/security/us-india-sanctions-caatsa-s400-russia>

¹⁴. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/india-russia-s-400-missiles-deal-biden-caatsa-sanctions-1870273-2021-10-28>