

## U.S. raises spectre of Russia sanctions

Business as usual: Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman with her Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu in Moscow. New Delhi has not shown any fear of sanctions. PTI

India and the U.S. are engaged in senior-level consultations over recent American sanctions against Russian entities, even as two visiting U.S. defence officials have told New Delhi that India is not fully immune to the sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

However, the government is unfazed, multiple government sources told *The Hindu*. Even Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had visited Moscow to discuss a slew of defence deals, including the S-400 air-defence missile systems.

P.S. Raghavan, Convener, National Security Advisory Board, told *The Hindu* that the U.S. could not seek to sustain a strategic partnership with India while trying to weaken India at the same time. "CAATSA is aimed at every country that has military and energy connections with Russia. And while the U.S. may claim it has a strategic motive, it cannot deny it has strong commercial objectives behind it. Basically, the U.S. is saying don't go to them [Russia], come to us [U.S.]," Mr. Raghavan, a former Indian Ambassador to Russia, said.

A senior military source said that India had conveyed to the U.S. at various levels its concerns about the implications of U.S. sanctions against several Russian entities involved in military supplies to India. "Both at the Foreign Secretary level and in the U.S., we have conveyed our stand that the sanctions cannot impinge on our relations with Russia, especially military acquisitions," he said. Discussions, he said, are continuing.

On January 29, the U.S. began imposing sanctions on foreign companies under Section 231 of CAATSA for transactions made with Russian defence and intelligence sector. "There is far more at risk at strategic level for the U.S., and they acknowledge that," the military source said.

Russia is India's biggest arms supplier to India, accounting for 62% of acquisitions in the past five years, show latest estimates.

"The U.S. can't offer anything that can compare to the S-400 [air-defence missile system] for India. Add to that, its processes are much more complicated. While the Russian government's nod allows the contract to proceed, in the U.S., the private companies have hesitations, the U.S. Congress, the DoD, State Department, White House, etc, can object and scuttle any deal," Mr. Raghavan said.

### U.S. position

*The Hindu* has learnt that since February, at least two senior U.S. defence officials have conveyed to India in no uncertain terms that India would not be immune to the proposed sanctions under CAATSA.

According to Section 231 of CAATSA, any country or entity that carries out "transactions with the intelligence or defence sectors" of the Russian government would face sanctions from the U.S.

The Ministry declined to comment on what India's response to the warnings was. However, it is understood that Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale and Defence Secretary Sanjay Mitra have both raised serious objections to the U.S. proposal in their bilateral meetings. The Indian Embassy in

Washington DC remains engaged on the issue, military sources said.

“We totally appreciate Indian’s concerns. It was raised in discussions during senior-level meetings last month. We are very concerned because we very much hope to maintain the momentum and the trajectory of this relationship. We want to deepen our cooperation and not reduce it,” Joe Felter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for South and Southeast Asia, told PTI in an interview earlier this month.

The new U.S. Pacific Commander nominee Admiral Philip Davidson also counselled a Senate hearing against penalising India for its defence ties with Russia.

A senior defence source said if the U.S. sought to unsettle India-Russia ties, it would not mean the U.S. will gain out of it through arms deals. “Today we have multiple options, from France to Israel. It would be better for the U.S. not to try and scuttle our military ties,” he said.

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