

ALIGNING A MISSILE DEAL WITH DESTINATION MANILA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

Earlier this month, India and the Philippines signed the “Implementing Arrangement” for “procurement of defense material and equipment procurement”. This agreement lays the groundwork for sales of defence systems such as the highly anticipated export of the BrahMos cruise missile, through the government-to-government route. As the Secretary, Philippine Department of National Defense publicly acknowledges, the archipelagic country’s intention of purchasing the missile, and a potential export deal for India, moves one step closer to reality. This deal will be of great significance for multiple reasons, and even though the procurement process is progressing steadfastly, there are many challenges that lie ahead.

Research and development of the BrahMos cruise missile systems began in the late 1990s. Manufactured by BrahMos Aerospace Limited, a joint venture between the Defence Research and Development Organisation and the joint stock company Military Industrial Consortium NPO Mashinostroyeniya (earlier known as the Federal State Unitary Enterprise NPOM of Russia), this is the first supersonic cruise missile to enter service. Capable of attaining a speed of Mach 2.8 (almost three times the speed of sound), it has a range of at least 290 km (a new version can reach up to 400km).

Travelling with such velocity means that it would be difficult for air defence systems utilising surface-to-air missiles to intercept the BrahMos while making it easier for it to target and neutralise advanced fighter jets such as the Chinese J-20 fighter aircraft moving at less than Mach 2. Even so, efforts to increase the speed and range of the missile in its next iterations are under way, with a goal of achieving hypersonic speeds (at or above Mach 5) and a maximum range of 1,500 km.

Early naval and land variants of the BrahMos were inducted into service by the Indian Navy in 2005 and the Indian Army in 2007. Subsequently, an air-launched variant was successfully tested in November 2017 by the Indian Air Force from its Sukhoi-30MKI fighter jet, giving the missile a dominating presence in all three domains.

These advanced and powerful capabilities of the BrahMos not only augment the strength of the Indian military but make it a highly desirable product for other countries to procure as well. Exporting the system, hence, has been on the agenda for more than a decade. Doing so would boost the credibility of India as a defence exporter, help it meet the target of \$5 billion in defence exports by 2025, and elevate its stature as a regional superpower. Countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa have so far shown an interest in acquiring the systems.

The implications of the Philippines becoming the first country to import the BrahMos would be wide-ranging and consequential in the Indo-Pacific. To begin with, it would caution China, with whom the Philippines has been engaged in a territorial conflict in the South China Sea, and act as a deterrent to Beijing’s aggressive posturing. Indeed, this is why China has been wary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries acquiring defence systems such as the BrahMos. Further, taking lessons, other nations threatened by Chinese belligerence may come forward to induct the BrahMos into their arsenal, thereby boosting India’s economic, soft, and hard power profile in the region and providing the Indo-Pacific with a strong and dependable anchor with which they can protect their sovereignty and territory.

The Government of India has prioritised making the country 'Atmanirbhar' in the defence manufacturing sector and establishing itself as a major defence exporter. The Philippines, on the other hand, has decided to buy the BrahMos out of geopolitical and strategic necessities. Nonetheless, two major roadblocks still remain in the Manila deal.

The first is the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which aims to sanction individuals and entities who engage in a "significant transaction" with a listed entity. So far, Turkey and China have been penalised under CAATSA for purchasing the S-400 Triumf air defense systems from Russia. NPO Mashinostroyeniya is one of the listed Russian entities. And since 65% of the components, including the ramjet engine and radar seeker used in the BrahMos, are reportedly provided by NPO Mashinostroyeniya, the export of the missile systems may attract sanctions. Remarkably, the United States, of which India is a major defence partner, has maintained ambiguity over whether it will introduce sanctions over India's acquisition of the S-400, licensed production of the AK-203 assault rifle, and export of the BrahMos. Hesitant of being sanctioned themselves, countries may shy away from purchasing the BrahMos. However, there is an excellent case for India to receive a waiver from CAATSA, especially *vis-à-vis* the BrahMos that can help contain a confrontational China.

The second issue pertains to financing. A regiment of the BrahMos, including a mobile command post, four missile-launcher vehicles, several missile carriers, and 90 missiles, reportedly costs around \$275.77 million (2,000 crore). Ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries which are interested in the BrahMos would find it difficult to purchase it. The cost of the systems has been a major hurdle in moving forward to reach a deal with the Philippines. To remedy this, India has offered a \$100 million line of credit, and the Philippines is thinking of purchasing just one battery of the BrahMos, consisting of three missile launchers with two to three missile tubes each.

With India determined to develop itself as a hub of defence manufacturing, how it handles the sale of the BrahMos would be an important factor in its potential emergence as a net provider of regional security in the Indo-Pacific.

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