

DOUBTS OVER DEFENCE SUPPLIES TO INDIA

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The Ukraine crisis could complicate the sanctions waiver India is seeking from the U.S. over the S-400 deal. File Photo | Photo Credit: ALEXANDER NEMENOV

With tensions escalating between Russia and the West over the Ukraine crisis, India, which has major defence cooperation with Moscow and Kyiv, faces uncertainty over timely deliveries in the near future in addition to the lingering threat of the U.S. sanctions under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) over the S-400 deal.

In the past, tensions between Russia and Ukraine had considerably delayed the modernisation of the An-32 transport fleet of the Indian Air Force (IAF).

"It is too early to say at the moment, but there could be delays in deliveries from Russia both due to their own domestic commitments as well the sanctions imposed by the West," an official source said on the condition of anonymity.

The current crisis could also complicate the CAATSA waiver India is looking for from the U.S. administration, two officials independently said. While, the S-400 deliveries began in December and are under way, a clarity on the timely completion was awaited, one of the official noted.

Several observers termed the severance of links and economic sanctions by the West on Russia "unprecedented." In this backdrop, India requires a functioning supply chain relationship with Russia for spares and support, which is critical for its military.

To questions on possible restrictions by the U.S. on Russian equipment, former Indian Ambassador to Russia D.B. Venkatesh Varma said, "It will be very unfortunate if the U.S. has the same objective as China — to weaken the India-Russia defence relationship to the detriment of India's defence capabilities."

Traditional supplier

While Russia has been a traditional military supplier sharing platforms and technologies that others would not, the cooperation has further deepened in recent years. For instance the defence trade between the two countries has crossed \$15 billion since 2018.

Even today, over 60% of Indian military inventory is of Russian origin, especially with respect to fighter jets, tanks, helicopters and submarines among others, while several deals are in the pipeline. For instance, in December, India and Russia signed a Rs. 5,000-crore deal for 6.1 lakh AK-203 assault rifles to be manufactured jointly in Uttar Pradesh. Production was to begin within a few months and it is expected to reach full-scale production within two or three years, said Alexander Mikheev, Director-General of Rosoboron export.

In addition, Russia is manufacturing two stealth frigates for the Navy. They are to be delivered next year onwards, while another two are being manufactured by the Goa Shipyard Limited under technology transfer. The keel of the ships has been laid and the Navy has said that the first one will be delivered in 2026 and the second one six months later.

India had signed a separate deal with Ukraine for eight Zorya-Mashproekt gas turbine engines

for the frigates. As reported earlier by *The Hindu*, officials had said that the engines, gear boxes and specialist support will cost around \$50 million a ship. India had taken delivery of engines for the first two frigates and handed them over to Russia for the frigates under construction there. However, the status of the engines for the frigates being built in India is not known. India is also looking to receive the third Akula class nuclear attack submarine (SSN) sometime in 2025. With the current offensive, the Russian defence industry may be preoccupied to supply to their own forces, a military officer observed, adding that they hoped it would be able to ensure timely deliveries.

Deals with Ukraine

As for Ukraine, it is upgrading over 100 An-32 transport aircraft of the IAF under a deal finalised in 2009.

While the upgrade of 45 An-32s in Ukraine was completed in 2015, the remaining aircraft were to be upgraded by the IAF Base Repair Depot, Kanpur. Ukraine officials had stated that all contractual obligations for the local upgrade would be fulfilled by 2020, though the current status was not immediately known.

At the Aero India in February 2021, Ukraine signed four agreements worth \$70 million, which includes sale of new weapons as well as maintenance and upgrade of the existing ones in service with the military, as reported earlier.

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