

WE WANT TO BE INDIA'S DEFENCE PARTNER OF CHOICE: U.S. OFFICIAL

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Michael L. Baker

"We want to be the partner of choice for India," a senior U.S. defence official said on Wednesday while stating that America is the best partner when it comes to sharing high-end technology and next-generation equipment while India diversifies its military arsenal ending heavy dependence on Russia. To a question on the situation on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and conversation between India and the U.S., Rear Admiral Michael L. Baker, the U.S. Defence Attaché in India, said the two countries worked closely to exchange views and both could not take the eye off the ball on regional security issues.

"India has the ability to choose its partners. It has made a conscious decision to diversify over the last decade. And it has made a conscious decision to partner with the U.S. on a host of areas. My focus is on how to take that forward," he said in a conversation with a small group of journalists. There are some pretty challenges across sharing high-end technology and next-generation equipment, and the U.S. is the best partner in that, he said.

To a question on the recent submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test by *INS Arihant*, India's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, the Rear Admiral said, "A country is able to go through and test its lawful and sovereign capabilities in a responsible way. From what I can tell, India has done that in a responsible way."

On the continuing stand-off in eastern Ladakh and the situation along the LAC, he said it was certainly an important area for them and they remained watchful. "We work closely with India to exchange our views on this area to make sure that we have a clear understanding of what we think may be happening. I think it is a space both for India and the U.S. to remain watchful. We can't take the eye off the ball of regional security issues."

There has been talk of India and the U.S. doing joint patrols in the past which was turned down by the Defence Ministry at that point. India has since carried out joint patrols with France. Asked if the time has come for joint patrols between India and the U.S., he said to one degree, they were conducting joint patrols, referring to the broad naval cooperation.

India has ships inside the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). Alongside the U.S., "we operate in the same operational space in the North Arabian Sea, in the Arabian Gulf", he noted. "As India makes its deployments into the Pacific, it is almost continually operating with the U.S. forces. Whether we make some sort of formal deceleration is kind of a secondary question. Navies of the world are out there on the sea together. We can't help but be in the space together... We operate together pretty routinely," he said.

On the efforts for co-development and co-production of military hardware, he said they had good meetings this year on the next steps of the the Defence Technology Trade Initiative (DTTI). "It is a focus area of our dialogue right now," he said.

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