

## RETAIL THERAPY: ON INDIA-U.S. 2+2 DIALOGUE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

A bunch of proposals amounting to about 46,000 crore approved by the Defence Acquisition Council is likely to boost defence cooperation with the U.S. Among the approvals is one for **24 Multi-Role Helicopters** with anti-submarine warfare capability for the Indian Navy, expected to cost around \$1.8 billion. These are likely to be procured under a government-to-government deal with the U.S. through its Foreign Military Sales programme. A suitable platform, the American Sikorsky MH-60, had already been shortlisted by the Navy, but the deal fell through. Helicopters in general and MRHs in particular are a critical capability vacuum for the Navy, with several capital ships sailing with empty flight decks. A major decision is the procedural approval for 111 Naval Utility Helicopters, costing over 21,000 crore. The process began last year but has been held up for want of clarity on the Strategic Partnership model, under which this would be the first project to take shape. The DAC has cleared the required guidelines on this, which should help take the process forward. Again, the U.S. has a major interest here as its companies are in the race for NUHs as well as for 114 fighter jets. The timing of these decisions is important as they come just before the first 2+2 dialogue between India and the U.S. on September 6, which will see India's External Affairs and Defence Ministers meeting their American counterparts. An announcement on the MRH sale is expected at the **2+2 dialogue** along with the sale of armed drones and the likely conclusion of the foundational agreement, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, which would allow the sale of encrypted systems and enable communications interoperability between the two militaries.

These developments fit into the U.S. strategy of strengthening defence cooperation, reflected in India's elevation as a Major Defence Partner, and the simplification of licensing requirements for high technology trade. India is at the heart of the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy; its National Security Strategy released in December 2017 says the U.S. will deepen strategic partnership and support our leadership role in Indian Ocean security and the broader region. But how long will the deals take to fructify? The Strategic Partnership policy itself needs policy clarity for seamless implementation. In addition, before embarking on multi-billion dollar deals, India must get clarity from the U.S. on its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, that could place limits of India's defence cooperation with Russia. India must retain its independent national security and foreign policy. The upgrade must also get us thinking more seriously about domestic defence manufacture — the country cannot aspire to be a global power and net security provider in the region by holding the tag of the largest arms importer year on year.

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