



# Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

67/16

## INDIA PLANS TO EXPORT BRAHMOS MISSILE TO VIETNAM

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Image: Indian Navy destroyer INS Rajput firing Brahmos supersonic cruise missile during trials.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The Indian Defence Minister, Manohar Parikkar, during his two day visit to Vietnam, on June 5, 2016, discussed the sale of Brahmos cruise missile with his Vietnamese counterpart General Ngo Xuan Lich<sup>1</sup>. India has been building closer ties with Vietnam and other ASEAN countries. The visit assumes importance in view

of China's activities in the South China Sea. Recently, Vietnam was also in the limelight when President Barack Obama of USA, during his visit to Vietnam on May 23, 2016, announced the lifting of arms embargo and allowing the sale of lethal arms to Vietnam after a hiatus of several decades. Thus, old enemies of the Vietnam War era, USA and Vietnam, had decided to come

together seemingly to counter the rise of China's growing military clout. President Obama was quick to point out that this move "was not based on China or any other considerations<sup>2</sup>." But it is apparent that the move was aimed at counter balancing China's rise. This article briefly discusses the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile system and the strategic significance of India shedding its long held aversion to arms exports.

India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's Military Industrial Corporation NPO Mashinostroyeniya (NPOM) have jointly developed the Brahmos missile<sup>3</sup>. Since Russia is a joint venture partner in the Brahmos project, Russia's approval has to be taken for export to third countries. This approval has already been taken with both India and Russia having agreed "in principle" to export Brahmos missile to UAE, Vietnam, South Africa and Chile<sup>4</sup>. Brahmos Aerospace also plans to sell the missile to several other countries and has had discussions with Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Egypt, Algeria, Singapore, Greece, Venezuela and Bulgaria. The Chinese have understandably, expressed their objections to any sale of weapons to Vietnam by India<sup>5</sup>. But the present Indian government is firm in its resolve to pursue the sale. Vietnam has been trying to purchase this missile for the last five years but the previous UPA government was hesitant to permit the sale<sup>6</sup>. Vietnam and China are involved in a conflict on maritime boundaries in the South China Sea and the sale of Brahmos

class of missiles will bolster its deterrent capabilities against China.

Brahmos is a two stage missile with a solid propellant booster for the first stage which propels it to supersonic speed and separates. The liquid propellant ramjet engine then accelerates it to its cruise speed of Mach 2.8<sup>7</sup> (Mach 2.8 speed is roughly 1 km per second). Brahmos is the "first supersonic cruise missile known to be in service<sup>8</sup>." The name BRAHMOS is an acronym derived from the name of two rivers, **Brahmaputra** in India and **Moskva** in Russia. The missile has been designed with stealth features and its Doppler inertial navigation platform has been upgraded with advanced Global Positioning System (GPS) and Russian Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) satellite navigation systems. Brahmos works on the "fire and forget" principle, the manufacturers claim it to be a very lethal missile capable of hitting the target with pin point accuracy with nine times the kinetic energy of conventional subsonic cruise missiles. The missile has a warhead of 300 kg and a maximum range of 290 km.

Indian Navy inducted Brahmos in 2005 when it was installed in the INS Rajput destroyer. All future ships of the Navy and those coming for mid-life up gradation will be fitted with this missile<sup>9</sup>. The ship launched anti ship version of the missile can fly at supersonic speed, skimming the sea at just 3 m – 4 m height for a concealed attack on enemy ships. The missile is fully

operational with three regiments of the Indian Army and two more new regiments are in the pipeline for induction in the coming days<sup>10</sup>. A submarine launched version of the missile has also been developed and submarine trials were completed in March 2013 off the coast of Vishakhapatnam. The missile is capable of vertical launch from submarines 40 m to 50 m deep. Keeping Chinese maritime threat in mind, Vietnam is building up its Navy with Russian Kilo class submarines. Brahmos submarine version can possibly be considered for use in Vietnam's Kilo class submarines.

Brahmos missile has stimulated interest in the world market and there seems to be a lot of potential for exporting the missile. As mentioned earlier a number of friendly countries have expressed interest in different variants of the system. India must seize this opportunity and pursue export sales with vigour and not let our traditional aversion to military sales come in the way. While India is the largest importer of arms in the world, China has moved up as the third largest exporter of arms<sup>11</sup>. The interest shown by countries in Brahmos gives India a chance to increase our arms exports. According to former Brahmos Aerospace CEO and Managing Director, A Sivathanu Pillai, India has the capability to do export business of almost \$ 100 billion in cruise missiles since the Brahmos missile is better than the U.S. Tomahawk missile<sup>12</sup>. The Modi government's "Make in India" plan aims to increase India's arms exports, from \$150 million

in 2015, to \$ 3 billion by 2025 and make India one of the top arms exporters in the world<sup>13</sup>. While this is a tall order it can be done if the government and industry pursue this aim with vigour.

In recent years China's aggressive behaviour and unfriendly acts have soured India-China relations and it seems that the overt show of cordiality may be coming to a head. China's border incursions, against India, in 2014, during President Xi Jinping's visit to India, were seen by many as attempts to coerce India and to test the waters with a new government led by Prime Minister Modi in power. The new government reacted swiftly and after a two week stand-off the Chinese and Indian troops withdrew to their earlier positions. Another thorn in India-China relations is China's strategic nexus with Pakistan – a known enemy of India. Chinese support for Pakistan's missile and nuclear weapons programme is continuing unabated. China is also pursuing its strategic and economic interests in Pakistan with unprecedented vigour. The 46 billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project will connect Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar port in coastal Balochistan. This project runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and has long term strategic implications for India. India is also unhappy with China blocking India's proposal for a United Nations ban on Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar<sup>14</sup>. In addition, China is opposing India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group

(NSG). Under these circumstances it is clear that China is not a real friend of India and the present NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government in New Delhi seems to have realised this. India will have to choose its partners to counter China's designs. Since China is unlikely to retract from its adversarial activities, India must continue its close relations with Vietnam, Japan, USA, Australia and other friendly nations. After all, China does not consider India's concerns when it exports nuclear technology and arms to Pakistan. China is the hegemonic power against whom India has to be prepared, along with other friendly countries, by building up its capabilities appropriately. Towards this end, Vietnam may well become the first country to receive the Brahmos missile to spur India's arms exports and enhance its regional influence keeping China in focus.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> DNA India, "Manohar parrikar meets Vietnamese defence minister; discuss sale of supersonic missile Brahmos," June 5, 2016, <http://www.dnaindia.com/money/report-manohar-parrikar-meets-vietnamese-defence-minister-discuss-sale-of-supersonic-missile-brahmos-2220281>, accessed on June 7, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> David Nakamura, "In historic move, U.S. lifts embargo on arms sales to Vietnam," in *Washington Post*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/05/23/in-historic-move-u-s-lifts-arms-sales-embargo-to-vietnam/>, accessed on June 5, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> NPOM is Russia's space and missile research organisation.

<sup>4</sup> Huma Siddiqui, "India-Russia agree to export BrahMos, world's fastest anti-ship cruise missile," in *Financial Express*, May 27, 2016, <http://www.financialexpress.com/article/economy/india-russia-team-up-to-export-worlds-fastest-anti-ship-cruise-missile-brahmos/266967/>, accessed on June 7, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Manjeet Singh Negi, "India to overlook Chinese objections, sell BrahMos missiles to Vietnam," *India Today*, June 3, 2016, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-china-brahmos-missiles-modi-government-vietnam/1/683455.html>, accessed on June 7, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "The Russian-Indian BrahMos supersonic cruise missile", *Sputnik*, <http://en.ria.ru/infographics/20100715/159821982.html>, accessed on June 6, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Brahmos Aerospace website, "Brahmos Supersonic Cruise Missile", <http://www.brahmos.com/content.php?id=10&sid=10>, accessed on June 6, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Brahmos Aerospace website, "Brahmos Supersonic Cruise Missile", <http://www.brahmos.com/content.php?id=10&sid=10>, accessed on June 6, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> PTI report, "Army to have 2 more regiments of Brahmos missile: Manohar Parrikar," in *The Economic Times*, March 31, 2016, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/army-to-have-2-more-regiments-of-brahmos-missile-manohar-parrikar/articleshow/51634075.cms>, accessed on June 7, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Rajat Pandit, "India remains world's largest arms importer, with 14% of total share", *Times of India*, February 22, 2016 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-remains-worlds-largest-arms-importer-with-14-of-total-share/articleshow/51095168.cms>, accessed on June 6, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> "India to Develop Smaller Missiles : Brahmos Aerospace", <http://www.brahmos.com/newscenter.php?newsid=175>, February 17, 2014, accessed on June 7, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> N.C.Bipindra, "India wants to be one of the world's biggest arms exporters," *Livemint*, January 28, 2016, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/uymwd8zmTQZORzBRdErzpI/Indias-3-billion-armsexport-goal-puts-China-in-Narendra-M.html>, accessed on June 6, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> "Sushma raises Azhar ban issue with China," *Indian Express*, April 19, 2016, p. 7.