

In a first, US naval ship Charles Drew arrives in Indian shipyard for repair

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Adding a new, strategic dimension to the burgeoning Indo-US military partnership, US Navy Ship (USNS) Charles Drew arrived at L&T's Katupalli Shipyard at Ennore, near Chennai, on August 7 for undertaking repairs and maintenance.

This will be the first time that a US Navy ship is being repaired in an Indian shipyard.

According to senior Ministry of Defence (MoD) officials, New Delhi had proposed during the 2+2 dialogue in April that the US Navy could avail of the services and expertise of Indian shipyards.

Enabling the repair of US Navy vessels in Indian shipyards was the conclusion of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016. The LEMOA eases the exchange of goods and warlike stores between the two navies.

The Indian side offered that, with the US "pivot to the Indo-Pacific", there would be 200-250 US Navy ves-

sels at any given time in the Indo-Pacific. These could be serviced in Indian shipyards, rather than sail all the way to American shipyards in the Pacific.

The USNS Charles Drew will be at Kattupalli shipyard for 11 days and undergo repairs in various areas, said the MoD.

After the Indian offer, US Navy teams visited Indian shipyards and evaluated their potential for handling US warships. A short-list of suitable shipyards was prepared, in which Mazagon Dock (MDL) in Mumbai and L&T's Katupalli shipyard were short-listed for this task.

Given the size of the 41,000-tonne USNS Charles Drew, L&T's massive shipyard at Katupalli was awarded the contract.

"The event signifies the capabilities of Indian shipyards in the global ship repairing market. Indian shipyards offer wide ranging and cost-effective ship repair and maintenance services,

using advanced maritime technology platforms," said a MoD press release on Sunday.

The US was already using Indo-Pacific bases at Diego Garcia and Singapore for maintenance and ship repair. It will now have the option of a third base.

Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar described the arrival of USNS Charles Drew for repairs as the harbinger of a maturing Indian shipbuilding industry.

"Today, India has six major shipyards with turnover of nearly \$2 billion. We are making ships not only for our own requirements. We have our own design house capable of making all kinds of state-of-the-art ships. The country's first Indigenous Aircraft Carrier, INS Vikrant, is a shining example of the growth of the Indian shipbuilding industry," stated the MoD.

Pointing out the high technology levels of Indian shipyards, Kumar said: "Under the new innovation ecosystem,

vessels capable of undertaking autonomous missions have been built by Goa Shipyard Limited and some of our start-ups. The shipbuilding industry today is not just carrying out conventional things, but is also amalgamating the latest technologies with it," he said.

The Defence Secretary asserted that US-India ties have been expanding and are based on common values and beliefs in an open, inclusive and rule-based order in Indo-Pacific and rest of the global commons.

"Indian defence exports have seen a massive increase in the last four-five years. Exports, which were worth about ₹1,500 crore in 2015-16, have now grown by 800 per cent to around ₹13,000 crore. A major destination for Indian exports is the US," said Ajay Kumar.

Rear Admiral Michael Baker, who is the Defence Attaché at the US Embassy at New Delhi, said: "Our shipping industries positively contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific by partnering to deliver effective, efficient, and economical repair of military vessels."

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