

India signs \$4 billion deal to procure 31 US Predator drones

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New Delhi, 15 October

India on Tuesday signed an agreement with the US to acquire 31 Predator high-altitude, long-endurance drones from American defence company General Atomics, under the foreign military sales programme. The deal, valued at nearly \$4 billion, is aimed at enhancing the combat capabilities of the Indian military, particularly along its disputed borders with China.

The agreement, concluded in the presence of senior defence and strategic officials from India in the national capital, represents a significant development in the military relationship between the two nations.

The defence ministry and General Atomics Global India also signed a contract for per-



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Contract signing between Ministry of Defence and US Government for Tri-Service procurement of 31 MQ-9B Sky/Sea Guardian High Altitude Long Endurance Remotely Piloted Aircraft System in New Delhi on Tuesday

formance-based logistics for the drones through depot-level maintenance, repair and overhaul in India.

Last week, the Cabinet Committee on Security, chaired by Prime Minister

Narendra Modi, had approved the purchase of the MQ-9B Predator armed drones. In June last year, the defence ministry had approved the acquisition of the MQ-9B drones from the US through a

government-to-government arrangement.

India is purchasing the drones primarily to enhance the surveillance capabilities of its armed forces along the frontier with China and in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The agreement includes 15 Sea Guardian drones for the Indian Navy and 16 Sky Guardians for the Indian Army and Indian Air Force (IAF).

It was reported in May that the Indian Army and the IAF plan to jointly deploy the Predator drones at air bases in Sarsawa and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh.

The IAF and the army will have eight each of these long endurance drones, which will enable them to cover almost all the areas of interest along the entire Line of Actual Control with China, from Ladakh to

Arunachal Pradesh.

Meanwhile, 15 of the 31 MQ-9B drones will be deployed by the Indian Navy for coverage of the maritime zone.

They are expected to significantly enhance the Indian Navy's ability to conduct unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance patrols in the IOR. With a flight time of over 36 hours at heights over 40,000 feet, the Predator drones can be armed with Hellfire air-to-ground missiles and smart bombs. These drones also specialise in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions.

The Sea Guardian variants for the navy are being procured for their ability to perform maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare, and over-the-horizon targeting, among other operations