

DOVAL TO LEAD FIRST INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGENCE HEADS' DELHI MEET

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Cordial relations: PM Narendra Modi during the inaugural session of Raisina Dialogue 2020 in New Delhi. PTI

Two days before the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) begins its annual Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval will lead discussions at India's first such conference of intelligence agency chiefs, also being held in the capital on Sunday.

The conference, modelled on the lines of the annual Munich Security Conference and Singapore's Shangri-La dialogue, is expected to bring together heads and deputy heads of the top intelligence and security organisations from more than 20 — mostly Western — countries and their allies. Intelligence chiefs and deputies from Australia, Germany, Israel, Singapore, Japan and New Zealand are among those expected to attend the conference.

Officials said the conference is being organised by country's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) that reports to National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval.

Sources said U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns and Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS) director David Vigneault were expected originally, but had to cancel their attendance in the last few days due to different reasons. As a result, meetings on the sidelines of the "Five eyes alliance" of the U.S., U.K., Canada, New Zealand and Australia, who coordinate on terrorism and security issues, as well as a first meeting of Quad countries' intelligence chiefs have been shelved.

The NSCS conference comes just before the MEA's "flagship conference on geopolitics and geoeconomics", the Raisina dialogue, held annually since 2016, kicks off on Tuesday.

Officials said that the intention of the conference was not a "meet and greet", but a more "sustained" plan to make connections between the agencies. Each session will be followed by intensive interactions between participants and specialists in each area of intelligence operations. The intelligence chief meeting on Sunday will be overshadowed by the war in Ukraine, and the impact of Russia's strikes on Ukrainian cities as well as measures and sanctions by western countries against Russia.

Along with the humanitarian situation arising from the strikes and deaths of thousands of civilians, American and European officials have been warning about the threat of nuclear, and chemical-biological warfare during the conflict. India has also been keen to ensure the focus on events in Europe do not take away from international cooperation on security threats in the region, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and from China at the Line of Actual Control. The Modi government's refusal to criticise Russia directly, and continue to discuss trade and payment mechanisms with Moscow, circumventing the EU and the U.S. sanctions, would see more behind-the-scenes conversations, the sources expected.

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