

## New dialogue format to help shift India-US ties to a higher plane

**New Delhi:** India and the US are reworking a key dialogue framework in place since 2015 in a bid to shift bilateral ties to a higher strategic plane.

The India-US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue, once described by the US State Department as the “signature mechanism for advancing the United States’ and India’s shared priorities,” is to be replaced by a dialogue in which the foreign and defence ministers will participate.

The shared priorities include job creation, improving the business and investment climate and sustaining a rules-based global order.

The two countries will have a separate dialogue on commercial issues, which will not include the foreign ministers, two people familiar with the development said separately. Till last year, trade and commercial issues were discussed in the Strategic and Commercial Dialogue and the Trade Policy Forum.

The first Strategic and Commercial Dialogue was held in 2015 in Washington and the second in New Delhi last year. It was seen as an elevation of the US-India Strategic Dialogue in place since 2009 and which focused on regional security, economic cooperation, defence, trade and climate challenges.

The new “two plus two” ministerial dialogue was announced earlier this week in a White House readout of a telephone call between US President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the eve of India completing 70 years as an independent country on 15 August.

“The leaders resolved to enhance peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region by establishing a new 2-by-2 ministerial dialogue that will elevate their strategic consultations,” the readout said without elaborating.

One of the two people familiar with the matter cited above said the new dialogue format will involve the Indian foreign minister and the US secretary of state as well as the Indian defence minister and the US defence secretary.

“It helps us because our strategic and defence interests reinforce each other. So a combined dialogue would be useful for India. The previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government was not too keen on having a foreign and defence ministers’ dialogue,” said former Indian ambassador to the US Lalit Mansingh.

On the other hand, “balancing commercial and strategic issues could be difficult now”, Mansingh said, especially as the Trump administration has focussed on trade issues with India including reducing the US deficit that stands at some \$30 billion.

The US has strategic consultations in this format with key partners and allies including Australia, Japan and the Philippines.

India has had a dialogue in the two-plus-two format with Japan with secretaries or senior-most bureaucrats from the foreign and defence ministries engaging each other.

Interestingly, the announcement of the new two-plus-two dialogue to “enhance peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region” comes against the backdrop of a spike in tensions between India and China with the Asian giants engaged in a military face-off on the Doklam plateau in Bhutan. It

also comes amid reports of American disenchantment with China over its inability to rein in North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

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