

Indo-US ties move one step closer

The United States has recently taken two major steps towards sustaining the defence relationship with India. One, the US Congress passed a new sanctions bill against Russia that allowed for a qualified exemption for India and other legacy buyers of Russian weapons. The bill now awaits White House approval. Two, the Donald Trump administration announced India would be given Strategic Trade Authorisation One (STA-1) status when it came to acquiring advanced US military equipment. This status has so far been granted only to very close US allies – only 36 countries in the world and none in South Asia have this standing.

The exemption from anti-Russian sanctions has still become actual law. More importantly it has yet to be tested. Even the present language requires evidence of a reduced defence relationship with Russia to be eligible for an exemption. And whether a country even deserves an exemption is left to the discretion of the White House. But the signalling from Washington indicates that the US accepts New Delhi's Moscow connection.

The cynical will argue all this does is help the US to sell more expensive weaponry to India. This is certainly a factor. US commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, when announcing the move, noted the lack of STA-1 status for India had affected over \$ 9 billion worth of US arms sales to India.

However, the real import of this decision is strategic. Underlying the years of tortuous defence negotiations between New Delhi and Washington is the recognition that if India is to maintain a military edge over China that edge would come from technology. While the US is easily the world leader in defence technology, it has also surrounded this with a thicket of legal and administrative safeguards to ensure it does not get into the wrong foreign hands. India has been a victim of these rules because it is not a formal US ally.

The Barack Obama administration redesignated India a "major defence partner" and thus a STA-2 country. But it also ruled India would have to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) before it could be promoted to STA-1. The Trump administration has now removed that requirement.

There are more milestones to be passed. India needs to sign up to the US Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement, better known as Comcasa, so it can access to advanced communications and surveillance technology. Ultimately, Indo-US defence cooperation needs to move faster than the expansion of Chinese power on India's periphery.

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