

TWO PLUS TWO TO TANGO: A LOOK AT WHAT THE UPCOMING INDIA-U.S. DIALOGUE MEANS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

Hard bargain: In his speech, Donald Trump called Narendra Modi 'fantastic and beautiful'. | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

The India-U.S. "2+2" dialogue will see the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman meet U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary James Mattis on September 6 in Delhi. The purpose is to get four key policymakers on the same page. This stems from the idea that India-U.S. ties are increasingly strategic, and in recent years, there have been concerns that while military ties and exercises have increased rapidly, diplomatic convergences aren't keeping pace. Conversely, despite close diplomatic exchanges, key defence agreements have not yet been completed. Several deals and high technology purchases require U.S. Congress clearance too, so it was felt necessary for the defence and diplomatic arms of Delhi and Washington to meet. The talks will also review the U.S.'s South Asia policy on Afghanistan and its Indo-Pacific strategy, both of which give India centre stage.

The idea for the meeting was discussed when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Washington in June 2017 and was subsequently announced by U.S. President Donald Trump. However, scheduling the four principals, each of whom has independently busy schedules, has been difficult. The two sides were finally able to agree on a date in April 2018 in Washington, but the meeting was put off after former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was fired. Another date in July was cancelled at the last minute as Mr. Pompeo had to fly to North Korea instead. Officials hope the September date in Delhi will prove "third time lucky" and end commentary that the U.S. administration was not giving the meeting due priority.

Ahead of the talks, a senior U.S. official said the 2+2 will discuss how to "operationalise India's status as a major defence partner". Apart from discussions on various defence purchases ranging from missile systems (NASAMS-II) to helicopters (24 Sikorsky MH-60 Romeo maritime helicopters) to drones (predator-B), the two sides are expected to sign the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) that has been pending for some years due to objections in India over sharing critical information. U.S. restrictions on defence purchases from Russia under the new CAATSA law will also be on the table for talks. Reports indicate that India may also be prepared to set up a direct hotline on Defence between Ms. Sitharaman and Mr. Mattis. Cooperation on fighting terrorism is expected to be a major issue for discussion and India is likely to push for the UNSC designation of Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar as a terrorist. Mr. Pompeo will fly into Delhi directly from Islamabad, and his engagement with the new Pakistani government will be watched closely. The U.S. is also likely to push for India's support in its campaign against Iran, although its demand that the Modi government cut its Iranian oil imports have thus far not borne fruit.

Trade is increasingly seen as a "strategic" issue in India-U.S. ties, and many of the economic irritants in the relationship are expected to be discussed, including the U.S. demands on lowering tariffs and subsidies, India's impending action at the WTO against the U.S., the Reserve Bank of India's "data localisation" order, and price caps on medical devices. India is also awaiting Mr. Trump's response to an invitation to visit India sometime later this year or early next year, possibly even for the Republic Day parade.

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