

## Terms of endearment

US Ambassador Kenneth Juster's proposal, to have India and the US post "reciprocal military liaison officers at each other's combatant commands", is of great import for both countries. In a sense, it seems part of the trajectory of growing strategic ties ever since the BJP government came to power in May 2014.

The two countries signed the foundational military agreement, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), two years ago, and the [Barack Obama](#) administration designated India a Major Defence Partner, hardcoding it into an act of the US Congress. President Donald Trump has followed suit, not only by making the right noises about India, but also by publicly admonishing and penalising Pakistan this year. Ambassador Juster's offer promises to take the element of military cooperation between the two countries, as a component of the bilateral strategic relationship, to a new level.

The US, currently, has arrangements for military liaison officers with some of its NATO allies and close defence partners, including Australia, Canada, Japan, Republic of Korea, Philippines, New Zealand and Great Britain. Posting liaison officers will mean formalising the robust partnerships between the two militaries — the Pacific Command of the US defence forces could station these officers in Indian military headquarters — placing India in the orbit of America's closest allies.

While India is not averse to a strong partnership with any country, it has been and remains rightly opposed to any military alliance which could impinge on its strategic flexibility. Dealing with an assertive China, as evidenced by the large number of Chinese transgressions into Indian territory in 2017, New Delhi needs space for geo-political manoeuvre to secure its interests.

President Trump's unpredictable pronouncements, his painting of stark oppositions of black and white, have adversely affected perceptions of America's reliability as a partner and should make the Indian government more cautious. Moreover, India is yet to see any benefits of being designated a Major Defence Partner, with no transfer of American defence technology for making major military platforms in India actually taking place. It is perhaps for these reasons that India has refused to discuss the possibility of signing the two other foundational military agreements with the US.

As disclosed by the Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat, the proposal for posting liaison officers was being discussed between the two governments but no decision has been taken yet. New Delhi seeks greater clarity over the role and charter of these officers to understand the value and quality of information that will be shared between the two militaries.

Even as the current US administration pushes New Delhi to buy more US military platforms — Trump has made selling defence equipment a part of the official charter of US diplomats — India sees little progress on economic issues closer to its heart, the H-1B visas for Indian citizens for example. India and the US are also arrayed on opposite sides in the WTO negotiations. New Delhi would be fully justified in seeking greater economic concessions from the Trump administration before considering any military arrangements with the US.

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