

## Resilience a hallmark of anomalous Indo-US bilateral ties

The inaugural 2+2 'dialogue' between India and the US, scheduled for July 6 in Washington DC, where Indian ministers Sushma Swaraj (external affairs) and Nirmala Sitharaman (defence) were to be hosted by their US counterparts, secretaries Mike Pompeo (state) and Jim Mattis (defence), has been cancelled and it is understood that this is due to the possibility of a Donald Trump-Vladimir Putin meeting very soon; or if the straws on social media are any indicator: is another Trump-Kim Jong-un meeting on the cards?

The more resigned mood in some quarters is that if Germany can be ejected from the World Cup in the group stage, anything can happen. And the extrapolation is that the abrupt cancellation of the 2+2 is an indicator of the Trump-driven deterioration in the India-US bilateral ties, the much touted relationship between the world's oldest and largest democracies.

However, this extreme conjecture may be misplaced and is to be seen as an unexpected tactical exigency in an otherwise satisfactory bilateral relationship that crossed a complex strategic-security hump related to the nuclear issue 10 years ago. In that period (September-October 2008), thanks to the political resolve of the then US President George W Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India was accorded an exceptional status in the global nuclear comity, though it remains a non-signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

The radical shift that had taken place in the bilateral ties was that from what was often described as a tense relationship between 'estranged democracies' (deep and angry estrangement over the nuclear issue for the US wanted to keep the global nuclear weapons club restricted to five members with China as the last entrant, which India vehemently opposed), post 2008, this relationship has become one of tentative engagement.

Successive leaders on both sides (Bill Clinton-Bush-Obama-Donald Trump and PV Narasimha Rao-Atal Bihari Vajpayee-Manmohan Singh-Narendra Modi) have shaped a certain post-Cold War continuity in ensuring a stable bilateral relationship and the past 25 years since the Clinton-Narasimha Rao engagement is testimony to this inherent resilience in this anomalous bilateral relationship.

The relationship remains anomalous for the political orientation and strategic culture of the US and India are very dissimilar. The US has assumed a global leadership role and works through military alliances and global trade and economic arrangements that are more beneficial to it. India, on the other hand, evolved through the cocoon of non-alignment and has distanced itself from any formal military alliance.

For the US, this was heresy and the Beltway found it difficult and often frustrating to deal with a nation that was neither fish nor fowl — and for all its non-aligned stance, established a close military-inventory relationship with Moscow.

On the Indian side, despite PM Indira Gandhi's testy relationship with the Nixon-Kissinger team and the US policies towards China and Pakistan that were detrimental to the Indian strategic profile, the Indian elite saw the US as the preferred destination for employment, business and higher studies. So while South Block denounced the 'foreign hand', the number of Indians who applied for US visas increased exponentially.

Since 2008, the bilateral has acquired traction in the military supply basket and this has crossed \$12 billion and is poised to increase. Paradoxically, even before India and the US embarked upon the July 2005 civilian nuclear agreement that attained fruition in October 2008, the defence

ministers of both nations (Donald Rumsfeld and Pranab Mukherjee ) signed a comprehensive and ambitious defence cooperation agreement in June 2005. And as anomalies go in this bilateral, it remains an aspiration and large sections are yet to be realised.

If the 2+2 dialogue, wherever it is again convened, even revisits the 2005 defence protocol and commits both sides to the vision that PM Narasimha Rao had outlined in May 1994 while addressing the US Congress (“Indo-United States relations are on the threshold of a bold new era”), the anomalies will be subsumed in a shared agenda that provides the political cohesion for the global democratic collective.

Whether President Trump will buy in to this remains moot.

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