

No longer seeing eye to eye?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis in Singapore. Photo courtesy: PIB | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

At his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last week, billed as a major foreign policy statement, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of India and the U.S.'s "shared vision" of an open and secure Indo-Pacific region. Yet his words differed so much from those of U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis, who spoke at the same event, that it seemed clear that New Delhi and Washington no longer see eye-to-eye on this issue, and several others as well.

To begin with, Mr. Modi referred to the Indo-Pacific, a term coined by the U.S. for the Indian and Pacific Oceans region, as a natural geographical region, not a strategic one, while Mr. Mattis called the Indo-Pacific a "priority theatre" and a "subset of [America's] broader security strategy" for his military command, now renamed the Indo-Pacific Command. While Mr. Modi referred to India's good relations with the U.S., Russia and China in equal measure, Mr. Mattis vowed to counter China's moves in the Indo-Pacific, and referred to the U.S. National Defence Strategy released this January, which puts both China and Russia in its crosshairs as the world's two "revisionist powers".

The divergence in their positions, admittedly, are due more to a shift in New Delhi's position over the past year than in the U.S.'s, when Mr. Modi and President Donald Trump met at the White House. A year ago, the Modi government seemed clear in its intention to counter China's growing clout in its neighbourhood, especially post-Doklam, challenge the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and back a Quadrilateral grouping of India, the U.S., Japan and Australia to maintain an open Indo-Pacific. Today, the Doklam issue has been buried, the BRI isn't as much a concern as before, and the government's non-confrontational attitude to the Maldives and Nepal indicates a softened policy on China in the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, Mr. Modi now essays a closer engagement with Chinese President Xi Jinping and a relationship reset with China after the Wuhan meeting.

The Quad formation, which is holding its second official meeting today in Singapore, has also been given short shrift. India rejected an Australian request to join maritime exercises along with the U.S. and Japan this June, and Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba said quite plainly last month that there was no plan to "militarise" the Quad. Contrast this with India's acceptance of military exercises with countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Russia-China led grouping it will join this week in Qingdao, and one can understand some of the confusion in Washington. Pentagon officials, who had come to accept India's diffidence on signing outstanding India-U.S. foundational agreements, are now left scratching their heads as India publicly enters the international arena in the corner with Russia and China, while proclaiming its intention to continue energy deals with Iran and Venezuela in defiance of American sanctions.

In a world where summits between leaders have replaced grand strategy, the optics are even clearer. Mr. Modi will have met Mr. Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin four-five times each by the end of the year, if one counts informal and formal summits, as well as meetings at the SCO, BRICS and G-20. In contrast, nearly half the year has gone in just scheduling the upcoming 2+2 meet of Indian and U.S. Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs.

Trade protectionism is clearly the other big point of divergence between India and the U.S., which have in recent months taken each other to the World Trade Organisation on several issues. There has been a surge in disputes between the two countries: on the new American steel and aluminium tariffs, the proposed cuts in H1B professional visas and cancellation of H4 spouse

visas, on India's tariffs and resistance to U.S. exports of dairy and pork products, on Indian price reductions on medical devices, and Reserve Bank of India rules on data localisation on Indian servers for U.S. companies.

The row over Harley-Davidson motorcycles is a case in point, where what should have been a small chink in the relationship has ended up denting the discourse quite seriously. When Mr. Trump announced to Harley executives and union representatives in February last year that he would stop countries "taking advantage" of them, no one in New Delhi paid much attention. Over the year, Mr. Trump grew more vocal in this demand, including twice during meetings with Mr. Modi in Washington and Manila, calling for India to scrap its 75-100% tariffs, given that the U.S. imposes zero tariffs on the import of Indian Royal Enfield motorcycles. Mr. Modi tried to accommodate U.S. concerns, and even called Mr. Trump on February 8 this year to tell him that tariffs were about to be cut to 50%. But after Mr. Trump divulged the contents of their conversation publicly, trade talks were driven into a rut. Officials in Washington still say that if India were to slash its rates, it would see major benefits in other areas of commerce, while officials in New Delhi say that with Mr. Trump having gone public with Mr. Modi's offer, it would be impossible to back down any further. In fact, a new cess has taken tariffs back up to 70%.

The biggest challenges to a common India-U.S. vision are now emerging from the new U.S. law called Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act and the U.S.'s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal with the threat of more secondary sanctions. Both actions have a direct impact on India, given its high dependence on defence hardware from Russia and its considerable energy interests in Iran. In particular, India's plans to acquire the Russian S-400 missile system will become the litmus test of whether India and the U.S. can resolve their differences. Clearly the differences over a big ticket deal like this should have been sorted out long before the decisions were made; yet there is no indication that the Trump administration and the Modi government took each other into confidence before doing so.

Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's avowal of the S-400 agreement, and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's open defiance of U.S. sanctions on Russia, Iran and Venezuela at separate press conferences this month couldn't have helped. It also didn't help that owing to Mr. Trump's sudden decision to sack Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State in March, the 2+2 meeting in April, which may have clarified matters, was put off. The truth is, building a relationship with the Trump administration in the past year has been tricky for both South Block and the Indian Embassy in Washington, as more than 30 key administration officials have quit or have been sacked — they have had to deal with three National Security Advisers, two Chiefs of Staff, as well as two Secretaries of State as interlocutors.

It is equally clear that the India-U.S. equation isn't balancing out quite the way it did last year, when Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump first announced the idea of the "2+2" dialogue. Ms. Swaraj, Ms. Sitharaman and their American counterparts have their work cut out for them during their upcoming meeting in Washington on July 6. If a week is a long time in politics, in geopolitics today a year is an eternity.

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