

MILITARY COOPERATION GROUP DIALOGUE WITH U.S. POSTPONED

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Mark Esper

The India-U.S. Military Cooperation Group (MCG) dialogue, scheduled for later this month, has been cancelled in view of the COVID-9 outbreak, and the proposed trip of U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper is also in question, defence sources said on Sunday.

India is considering a U.S. request for posting liaison officers at the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). This was to be discussed at the dialogue.

“The MCG dialogue, to be held in the U.S. this time, has been cancelled due to COVID-19. The formal decision on Mr. Esper’s visit is expected on Monday,” a defence source told *The Hindu*. Given the current situation, the visit looks doubtful, another official said.

The MCG is a forum to review the progress of defence cooperation between India’s Integrated Defence Staff and the USINDOPACOM at the strategic and operational levels. The Integrated Defence Staff was responsible for coordination among the armed forces before the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff.

As part of improving defence cooperation and interoperability, India is considering a U.S. request for posting liaison officers at the USINDOPACOM and the USSOCOM.

“We have posted a liaison officer at the U.S. Navy Central Command in Bahrain and a U.S. liaison officer, in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, has joined the Indian Navy’s Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region at Gurugram,” another defence source said. This is an outcome of the agreement reached at the last 2+2 dialogue in December last, which also “noted their [India and the U.S.] intent to explore further military liaison relationships.”

The liaison officer at the USINDOPACOM is likely to be a Navy officer, while the one at the USSOCOM will probably be an Army officer. “The modalities are still being worked out,” the official said, adding it could fructify by early next year.

The MCG was to have reviewed the decisions taken at the 2+2 dialogue and the recent visit of President Donald Trump to India. Further, it was to follow up on the visit and fast-track the decisions, including that on 24 MH-60R multi-role helicopters, the official said.

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