

# INDIA AND THE U.S. — IT'S COMPLICATED

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

The first round of the [India-U.S. 2+2 talks at the level](#) of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and their counterparts Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary James Mattis is scheduled for September 6 in Delhi. It is a significant development but one that appears perfectly logical when seen against the two-decade-old trend line of India-U.S. relations. True, the trend line has not been smooth but the trajectory definitively reflects a growing strategic engagement. From estranged democracies, India and U.S. can worst be described today as prickly partners.

Three factors have contributed to the emerging strategic convergence. The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity to both countries to review their relationship in the light of changing global and regional realities. Second, with the opening of the Indian economy, the American private sector began to look at India with greater interest. Trade grew and today stands at more than \$120 billion a year with an ambitious target of touching \$500 billion in five years. If U.S. foreign direct investment in India is more than \$20 billion, Indian companies too have invested \$15 billion in the U.S., reflecting a sustained mutual interest. The third factor is the political coming of age of the three-million-strong Indian diaspora. Its influence can be seen in the bipartisan composition of the India Caucus in the U.S. Congress and the Senate Friends of India group.

China will be 'front & centre' of 2+2 talks, says U.S. official

Yet, the engagement has not been smooth sailing. The U.S. is used to dealing with allies (invariably junior partners in a U.S.-dominated alliance structure) and adversaries. India is neither, and is also determined to safeguard its strategic autonomy. Developing a habit of talking to each other as equal partners has been a learning experience for India and the U.S.

Both countries also consider themselves to be 'exceptional', the U.S. as among the oldest democracies and India as the largest! Both have a habit of preaching and problems arise when they preach to each other. Indians become wary of the U.S.'s attempts to drive unequal bargains, and Americans find the Indian approach rigid and sanctimonious. Despite this, significant progress has been registered over the years resulting in the 60-plus bilateral dialogues, to which the 2+2 is now being added.

Two parallel tracks of dialogue began in the 1990s. The strategic dialogue covering nuclear issues shifted gears following the nuclear tests of 1998 and imposition of sanctions by the U.S. The over a dozen rounds of talks between Jaswant Singh and Strobe Talbott during 1998-2000 marked the most intense dialogue between the two countries. It helped change perceptions leading to the gradual lifting of sanctions. The next phase was the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership steered by the then National Security Advisers, Brajesh Mishra and Condoleezza Rice. The momentum received a new impulse, thanks to the warmth between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush, eventually leading to the conclusion of the India-U.S. bilateral civil nuclear cooperation agreement in 2008.

The defence dialogue began in 1995 with the setting up of the Defence Policy Group at the level of the Defence Secretary and his Pentagon counterpart and three Steering Groups to develop exchanges between the Services. A decade later, this was formalised and enlarged into the India-U.S. Defence Framework Agreement which was renewed for 10 years in 2015. Today, the

U.S. is the country with which India undertakes the largest number of military exercises which have gradually evolved in scale and complexity.

During the Cold War, more than three-fourths of India's defence equipment was of Soviet origin. This gradually began to change, and in recent years, the U.S. and Israel emerged as major suppliers. The Indian Air Force went in for C-130J Hercules and the C-17 Globemaster aircraft, along with Apache attack helicopters and Chinook heavy lift helicopters. The Indian Navy acquired a troop carrier ship and the P-8I long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft. An agreement for 24 multi-role helicopters for the Indian Navy is expected soon. The Indian Army went in for the M-777 howitzers and artillery radars. From a total of less than \$400 million of defence acquisitions during 1947-2005, the U.S. has signed defence contracts of over \$15 billion since.

2+2 dialogue an indication of deepening strategic partnership: U.S.

During the Obama administration, Defence Secretary Ashton Carter became a strong votary of closer defence cooperation between the two countries. He soon understood that a defence supply relationship needed to be backed by technology sharing and joint development and came up with the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTII). Pathfinder projects have been identified under this banner. To get around export control licensing and other bureaucratic hurdles, an India Rapid Reaction Cell in the Pentagon was set up. In 2016, India was designated as a 'Major Defence Partner' country. Another step forward in the middle of this year was the inclusion of India in the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1) category, putting it on a par with allies in terms of technology access. This should enable the DTII to graduate to more ambitious projects.

Acquiring U.S. high technology comes with its own set of obligations in terms of ensuring its security. These take the form of various undertakings often described as foundational agreements. The first of these was GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) which India signed in 2002. The other three related to logistics support, communications compatibility and security, and exchanges of geospatial information. The U.S. proposed its standard logistics support agreement text in 2003 which was finally concluded in 2016, after it was made into an India-specific text. It facilitates logistics supplies during port visits and joint exercises and does not contain any obligations for joint activity or any basing arrangements. Realising Indian reservations, the U.S. was more flexible, and now the India-specific Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) is likely to be signed. It makes it possible to install high-end secure communication equipment on U.S. platforms that we have been acquiring. With the possibility of acquiring armed Sea Guardian drones, COMCASA was necessary to ensure optimal use. The lessons learnt should help in expediting negotiations on the third.

Nevertheless, two difficult issues loom large and the 2+2 offers an opportunity for addressing these. The first is the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) enacted last year which enables the U.S. government to sanction countries that engage in 'significant transactions' with Russian military and intelligence entities. The proposed purchase of the S-400 missile defence system would attract CAATSA sanctions. A waiver provision has now been introduced to cover India, Indonesia and Vietnam. It requires certification by the U.S. that the country concerned is gradually reducing its dependency on Russian equipment and cooperating with the U.S. on critical security issues. Indian concerns on this need to be addressed.

The second relates to U.S. sanctions on Iran after its unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Iranian crude imports have grown significantly in recent years and India also stepped up its

involvement in developing Chabahar port. The port provides connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act (2012) contains a waiver provision in case of activities for reconstruction assistance and economic development for Afghanistan, which is a U.S. priority too.

Creative thinking will be needed in the 2+2 dialogue to overcome these challenges, which should also ensure that there are no nasty surprises and difficult issues are settled through quiet diplomacy. In order to realise the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (2015), both countries will have to nurture the habit of talking and working together to diminish some of the prickliness in the partnership.

*Rakesh Sood is a former diplomat and currently Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation. E-mail: rakeshsood2001@yahoo.com*

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com