

2+2 dialogue: US must cater for Indian concerns

The 2+ 2 dialogue between the US and India is scheduled for 6th Sep. While in every manner, it indicates the growing relationship between the two countries, there are differences on multiple points. For the US, India is the strategic partner they seek in Asia, a nation which can stand on its own against China and a democracy with shared values and commonality in strategic thought and futuristic vision. In addition, being the largest importer of weapons, it is an ideal market to tap, considering India's growing appetite to enhance the combat potential of its armed forces.

The two nations have already signed LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), which enables sharing of facilities for both the armed forces. This enhances the reach of both militaries and enables smoother coordination. This agreement presently covers port calls, joint exercises, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

There is a possibility of also inking COMCASA (Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement) during this round of talks. This is a legal framework for the transfer of communication security equipment from the US to India on platforms which India is in the process of purchasing, thus enhancing interoperability between the two countries. The main concern for India, which if addressed, may clear the deal, is intrusive American access to Indian military communications and visits by US inspectors to Indian bases.

There are differences in outlook on multiple issues too. India believes in following its own strategic autonomy in foreign and defence matters, which in some cases may not be in tune with US policies. The two sore points are India's military purchases from Russia and Indian-Iranian relations.

In addition is that under Trump, the US has for the first time, delinked economic and defence partnerships. Thus, while it may enhance security relations, call India a major strategic partner, yet it seeks to impose tariffs on Indian products and restrict the inflow of Indians to the country, through the H1B Visa route. Since economy and national security are intertwined, such an action raises doubts on US long term intentions and whether its decisions are in selfish interest.

The two major differences which would be discussed during the forthcoming meeting are India's strategic relationships with Russia and Iran. On the Russian front, India's relations are far older than those with the US. A large part of the Indian military employs Russian equipment. India is a member of multiple forums with Russia, primary being the SCO and BRICS. Further, to keep Russia from supporting Pak on similar lines as China, India needs to continuously engage with it. India therefore has a different strategic perspective of its relations with Russia, which it cannot ignore. The US desire's that India dump Russia for it, is therefore illogical and against Indian strategic autonomy.

India would continue to procure weapons from Russia, especially where it necessitates enhancing its armed forces combat power. Thus, seeking to place India under CAATSA, solely because the US has its own issues with Russia, would impact US-India relations. Presently, some Indian military procurements from the US appear to be an act of bribery seeking to placate its anger over Indian dealings with Russia. India is wary to solely bank on US equipment as it can be blackmailed by spares or employment issues, in case there are glitches in the relationship. When two nations consider themselves strategic partners, seeking to force the other into supporting its policies, erodes the relationship.

Another major point of contention is Indian-Iran relations. India cannot let this relationship recede, more for its own strategic reasons than for challenging US actions, which appear to be short term and designed to prove that Trump has stuck to his electoral promises. Chabahar and Iranian oil are both strategically essential for India. It cannot dump either to meet US demands. The next US President may move back to supporting the Iranian nuclear deal, however, if India acts against Iran at this moment, when it is almost alone, then it may be the loser in the long term.

It took time for India to recommence Chabahar after it supported UN sanctions on Iran. It cannot risk that again. Chabahar for India is the nearest to countering Gwadar and enhancing its trade ties with Afghanistan and Central Asia. If India even contemplates slowing

down or walking out based on US demands, China would willingly step in. Its investments would be impacted, and China would gain another port to enhance its string of pearls.

Continuing purchase of Iranian oil would indicate the strength of ongoing Indo-Iranian relations. It would also project that India is a friend. This relationship has multiple benefits for India. It leaves doors open for India to be a negotiator in the long term, keeps China at bay and enables India to influence Iranian policies on its support to the Taliban and Pakistan. While maintaining a façade of agreeing to US demands, oil purchasing may reduce and switch to the Rupee/Rial mode, which should be acceptable to the US.

While the EU and other nations which inked the Iran nuclear deal alongside the US have criticized US actions, many of their companies are walking out of Iran. Though the EU is attempting to salvage the deal, it may suffer consequences of US threats. Therefore, India's support is essential.

The other area of engagement is US approach to SE Asia. Unless China is contained in SE Asia, it would expand further by its OBOR, thus enhancing its political and economic influence in economically weaker nations, which are coming into their debt trap. This would embolden China and enhance its strategic reach. The US at present appears to be concerned only about Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, rather than in partnering with nations in SE Asia

to stem Chinese expansionism. Though Mike Pompeo had stated on the issue that the US believes in, 'strategic partnership, not strategic dependence' nothing seems to be moving.

If the two nations are genuine strategic partners, then each needs to understand the others concerns. While the US may have its eyes on China, Russia and Iran, it cannot ignore India's strategic autonomy in foreign policy and defence procurement. After all it is India which would ultimately have to face its adversaries in the region. Both working together in SE Asia, supporting weaker nations from Chinese economic and military domination, may stem Chinese influence from spreading across Asia and Africa.