

# India expands anti-China “strategic partnership” with Washington

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Thursday’s inaugural “2+2” strategic dialogue between the US and India ended with New Delhi signing on to yet another “foundational” military cooperation agreement aimed at transforming India into a front-line state in the US military-strategic offensive against China.

Patterned after one of the key mechanisms Washington uses to manage its military-strategic ties with Japan and Australia, its chief Asia-Pacific allies, the “2+2” dialogue is to be an annual event bringing together the US and Indian foreign and defence ministers.

The joint statement that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Defense Secretary James Mattis, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman issued at the conclusion of their series of meetings in New Delhi Thursday outlined numerous initiatives to expand Indo-US military and strategic cooperation.

The most consequential of these is India’s adoption, after ten years of negotiations, of a Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) modeled on agreements Washington has with its most important NATO and treaty allies. It will enable the Indian military to obtain advanced US communications equipment for its weapons systems, and enhance encrypted communication and “inter-operability” between the militaries of the US, its allies, and India.

The agreement is expected to pave the way for a further major boost in Indian purchases of US weaponry, likely beginning with the procuring of armed naval drones for anti-submarine warfare. India’s military long balked at signing such an agreement for fear that it would facilitate US spying on its activities.

But the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has dramatically expanded India’s integration into Washington’s anti-China offensive, including sanctioning the exchange of intelligence about ship and submarine movements in the Indian Ocean and parroting the US line on the South China dispute.

COMCASA is the second of three bilateral agreements that Washington insists are “foundational” for any true military-strategic partnership, and for India gaining the full benefit—through access to the most advanced weapons systems that the Pentagon is willing to share with allies—of its recent designation as a “Major Defence Partner” of the US.

Under the Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement, which was signed in 2016 and operationalized last year, India has opened

its air bases and naval ports to routine use by US warplanes and battleships for refueling and resupply.

With New Delhi inking the COMCASA pact, negotiations on the third and final “foundational” agreement, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA), are expected to go into high-gear.

New Delhi and Washington also announced that they will stage their first-ever joint exercise involving all three branches of India’s military next year, and that they are setting up “hotlines” between their respective foreign and defence ministries “to help maintain regular high-level communication on emerging developments.”

The “2+2” joint statement also commits New Delhi and Washington to increased bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security cooperation. While they are not named in the statement, a longstanding US objective has been to draw India into closer cooperation with Japan and Australia, with the ultimate aim of creating a NATO-style US-led alliance against China.

Under Modi, New Delhi has increased trilateral cooperation with both Japan and Australia, including making the former a permanent partner, alongside India and the US, of the annual Malabar naval exercise. Last November, senior officials from the US, Japan, Australia and India held a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, reviving a forum that had been abandoned a decade before after vociferous protests from China.

The statement reiterated commitments from recent Indo-US communiqués to uphold a “rules-based order” and “freedom of navigation” in the Indo-Pacific region—that is, US hegemony, including the unfettered right of the US Navy to maintain an armada off China’s shores. No less significantly, it pledged the two countries will “work together to counter North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction,” under conditions where Trump has repeatedly threatened to annihilate that small, impoverished country.

On his way to New Delhi, Pompeo made a brief stop-over in Islamabad where he hectorated Pakistan’s new government, insisting that they do more to assist Washington in subduing the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Pompeo’s threats were directed in the first instance at Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and the country’s military-security establishment. But they were also clearly aimed at New Delhi, which under Modi has adopted an even more belligerent posture against Pakistan than its predecessor, including cross-border military strikes and repeated

threats of war.

The “2+2” statement welcomed “India’s enhanced role in Afghanistan’s development and stabilization,” while calling on Pakistan “to ensure that the territory under its control is not used to launch terrorist countries in other countries.”

At the conclusion of the “2+2” meetings, Defence Secretary Mattis said Washington would continue to work with India “to elevate our relationship to a level commensurate with our closest allies and partners.” His Indian counterpart, Nirmala Sitharaman, was even more effusive. “The momentum in our defense partnership,” she said, “has imbued a tremendous positive energy that has elevated India-US relations to unprecedented heights.”

Her colleague, Foreign Minister Swaraj, said India “welcome[s] President Trump’s policy on Afghanistan”—that is Washington’s plans to intensify the bloodletting in Afghanistan and turn the screws on India’s arch-rival Pakistan.

During the past two decades, a central objective of US foreign policy, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, has been to draw India into America’s strategic orbit and develop it as a military-strategic counterweight to China. Toward this end, Washington has plied New Delhi with strategic “favours,” including the 2008 nuclear deal, which allowed India to purchase civilian nuclear technology and fuel, enabling it to focus its indigenous nuclear program on developing its nuclear arsenal.

The pivotal role India and the Indian Ocean play in Washington’s plans to strategically encircle and subjugate China is reflected in the recent decision to rename the US Navy’s Pacific Command the Indo-Pacific Command.

### **India’s “reset” of its relations with China, and its limits**

Over the course of the past half-year there has been much talk of a “reset” in Sino-Indian relations. It is certainly true that New Delhi has taken a number of steps to reduce tensions with Beijing, which in the summer of 2017, during the armed stand-off over control of a remote Himalayan ridge (the Doklam), threatened to spiral out of control. Concerns over Trump’s aggressive “America First” and oft-times erratic foreign policy, particularly his trade war measures, no doubt were also a factor in Modi’s sudden prioritizing last spring of improved relations with Beijing.

Thursday’s Indo-US “strategic dialogue” makes clear, however, that despite the “China reset,” the Indo-US alliance remains the cornerstone of India foreign policy. Under conditions of capitalist breakdown, the venal Indian bourgeoisie sees no other path to pursuing its great power ambitions than aligning itself with Washington, no matter how reckless and manifest becomes the crisis of US imperialism.

That said, there are significant tensions between New Delhi and Washington, as the US, anxious to stave off decline, demands “more” from rivals and allies alike.

India is certainly rankled by Trump’s protectionist measures, including the aluminum and steel tariffs, his demands India reduce its trade surplus with America and his restriction on the H1B Visa

program, under which Indian-based IT companies have been able to bring skilled workers into the US.

The tensions over strategic questions are if anything greater. Washington is demanding India fall into line with its drive to crash the Iranian economy through the reintroduction of sanctions, an economic embargo that is tantamount to war, although Tehran has fulfilled all its obligations under the 2015 Iran nuclear accord.

Not only is India a major importer of Iranian oil, India has been developing the Iranian port of Chabahar to open a transit corridor to Central Asia, so it can vie for strategic influence and a share of that region’s massive energy reserves.

Prior to Thursday’s meeting, the Trump administration had been adamant that, unlike Obama, it will not provide any “waivers” exempting those dependent on imports of Iranian oil from the full force of the sanctions when they come into force on Nov. 4. As he left New Delhi, Pompeo was slightly more accommodating, indicating India could be offered a waiver but only for a brief interim. “We will consider waivers where appropriate,” said the US Secretary of State, “but it is our expectation that the purchases of Iranian crude oil will go to zero from every country or sanctions will be imposed.”

Everything indicates that when push comes to shove, New Delhi will bend to Washington’s diktats, just as it did to the Bush and Obama administrations’ campaign against Iran, so as not to jeopardize its “partnership” with the US.

Things are even more fractious when it comes to Russia. For many decades Moscow was New Delhi’s most important strategic partner and it continues to furnish India with crucial war materiel and plays a vital role in its nuclear program.

Washington is angered that India is in the process of purchasing Russia’s S-400 air defence system, with US officials warning that this could lead to sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

The Trump administration is divided over the issue, with Mattis publicly arguing it would be a mistake to jeopardize the Indo-US partnership over it. But even if Washington does decide to give a waiver to India over the S-400, the long-term implication for India is clear: the US is intent on disrupting and ultimately breaking India’s partnership with Russia.



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