

US-Indian Relations: Trump Gets a Unique Partner for America First

by M. Bhadrakumar via janice - Strategic Culture *Wednesday, Sep 19 2018, 1:38am*

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The inaugural meeting of the foreign and defence ministers of India and the United States in a new “2+2” format on September 6 in New Delhi assumed added significance as an attempt by the Trump administration to translate its Indo-Pacific vision outlined in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of last December.

The NSS had explicitly singled out Russia and China as “revisionist” powers that “challenge American power, influence and interests.” Equally, it ascribed a pivotal role to India in the Indo-Pacific. The “2+2” deliberations fleshed out these two templates.

For the first time in the post-Cold War era, the US has inserted itself into the “time-tested” relationship between India and Russia. Demolition of Indian-Russian partnership has been a hidden agenda of the US’ regional policy since the 1990s but it surged in an overt and abrasive form last week.

This shift from an aspirational approach to intrusive approach can be seen in the backdrop of the deterioration of US-Russia relations and the probability that tensions are unlikely to dissipate in a foreseeable future. The US sanctions against Russian defence sectors have been enacted in the full knowledge that India would be an acutely affected party. The US sanctions laws against Russia are acting like the Damocles’ sword to wear down India’s resistance to rollback in ties with Russia.

A similar US assault on India-Russia energy cooperation can be expected soon, which is another promising area for US exports to India. Besides, the US is also threatening to sanction Russia’s financial sector. Clearly, what the US is seeking goes far beyond a reset or atrophy in the Indian-Russian relationship. It aims at nothing less than draining the contents of the “Special Privileged Strategic Partnership” between India and Russia and make it an empty shell. Yet, partnership with Russia has been historically an anchor sheet of India’s strategic autonomy.

Indeed, it becomes a sad reflection of the huge inroads the US has made through the recent decade since the signing of the 2008 US-Indian nuclear deal to breach India’s strategic autonomy. Put differently, weakening of the India-Russia relations is an imperative need for Washington to hustle India on the path of becoming its key ally in the Indo-Pacific. Such a profound shift in the US approach can only be understood in terms of the strategic importance and the sense of urgency that the NSS attaches to the Indo-Pacific region.

The NSS ranks the Indo-Pacific as a strategically more vital area than the Middle East (which has been the principal domain so far of the US’ strategic attention.) The NSS prioritizes the “Quad” (quadrilateral alliance of the US, Japan, Australia and India) more emphatically than even Washington’s transatlantic leadership as a platform of the US’ global strategies. Washington intends to checkmate China, which the NSS has portrayed as the US’ competitor who poses challenge to its world leadership and the international order.

Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy appeals to the Indian audience alongside the NSS’ grand designation of India as a “leading global power”. Delhi exulted over the NSS document: “We

appreciate the importance given to India-United States relationship... the two responsible democracies...share the same objectives." To be sure, the Trump administration has rekindled a decade-old Indian dream of being a "counterweight" to China.

An influential section of India's foreign-policy elite remains wedded to the notion that fundamentally, the US helped China's rise in the Cold War era and that India is similarly well positioned to garner American benevolence in the emergent New Cold War conditions. The "2+2" highlighted that the US has astutely tapped into the Indian elite's "unipolar predicament".

In the recent period since the NSS was announced, the Trump administration has declared India as a "Major Defence Partner", opening the door for the sale of more advanced and sensitive military technologies by American vendors at par with the US' closest allies and partners, and fostering convergence of interests with India on a range of issues like maritime security, domain awareness and so on.

Without doubt, this has been a "win-win" strategy for Washington. The signing of a Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) at the "2+2" testifies to it. The COMCASA is modeled on agreements Washington has with its most important NATO and treaty allies. It is a big leap forward in developing "inter-operability" between the militaries of the US, its allies, and India, which in turn transforms India into a front-line state in the US' military-strategic offensive against China in the Indo-Pacific. Another such "foundational agreement", Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement (signed in 2016 and operationalized last year), has already opened India's air bases and naval ports to routine use by US warplanes and battleships for refueling and resupply.

The "2+2" joint statement announced that India and US 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." It commits the two countries to increased bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security cooperation. On the other hand, COMCASA is expected to pave the way for a major boost in Indian purchases of US weaponry, which is likely to begin with India's procurement of armed naval drones for anti-submarine warfare.

All this works splendidly for the US. In sum, by playing on India's geopolitical apprehensions regarding China's rise as a global power and playing astutely on India's own great-power ambitions, US is promoting on the one hand its business interests in the Indian market while on the other hand also locking India into its Indo-Pacific alliance system against China as well as progressively undermining the India-Russia "time-tested" relationship.

It's a "win-win" strategy all the way. The Trump White House has drawn encouragement from the "2+2" to push the idea of concluding a free-trade agreement with India. Informal conversations have already begun.

Trump appears bullish that when push comes to shove, the present Indian government will bend to Washington's diktats. Indeed, the Trump administration can count on influential back channels, too. It is no secret that the upper caste Indian Diaspora in the US has close links with the Hindu nationalist groups that mentor Modi government.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Trump sees Prime Minister Modi as a unique partner for his "America First" project. Trump will skip the East Asia Summit in Singapore in November but is signaling interest in Modi's invitation to him to be the guest of honor at India's National Day celebrations in January.

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