

One thing common among India and The United States is their growing tensions with China. The United States has repeatedly imposed multiple sanctions on Chinese goods and has actively targeted China as the ultimate reason for the pandemic and the havoc it has created. India, on the other hand, has been facing Chinese assertion in the region especially with the escalating border disputes in Ladakh. With China being painted as the world's new threat, the geopolitical scenario is vividly changing with new alliances being formed and older alliances being rejuvenated. Lately, the ties between the United States and India have also seen a new light, first, with Trump's visit to India and then with the whole satire that unfolded about Hydroxychloroquine. This is being lifted up to now, with both sides deciding on holding a 2+2 ministerial meeting via a video conference to discuss the latest foreign policy and a bilateral stance focussed against China.

Agenda of the meeting

This particular round of talks is significant to India especially because of the ongoing tussle at its borders with China. Defence experts have pointed out that the long-pending deal of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), a US defence foundational pact, that will not only enable India to increase the efficiency of its defence hardware systems and artillery but also get assistance and expertise on any form of geospatial intelligence from the United States, will finally be signed. The final draft has already been worked upon before the pandemic but the signing, which was supposed to happen in July, got delayed due to the pandemic. The Quad or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a strategic forum between the US, India, Australia and Japan and ways to strengthen it in the Indo Pacific region, is also on the agenda of the conference. This region is extremely sensitive due to the increased Chinese Naval and trade activity and has to be kept in check to protect the sovereignty of countries situated here. The meeting is scheduled to be held in September 2020, which has been decided to be led by the External Affairs Minister of India, M. Jaishankar and the Defence Minister of India, Rajnath Singh. The Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mark Esper will be the US counterparts for the meeting.



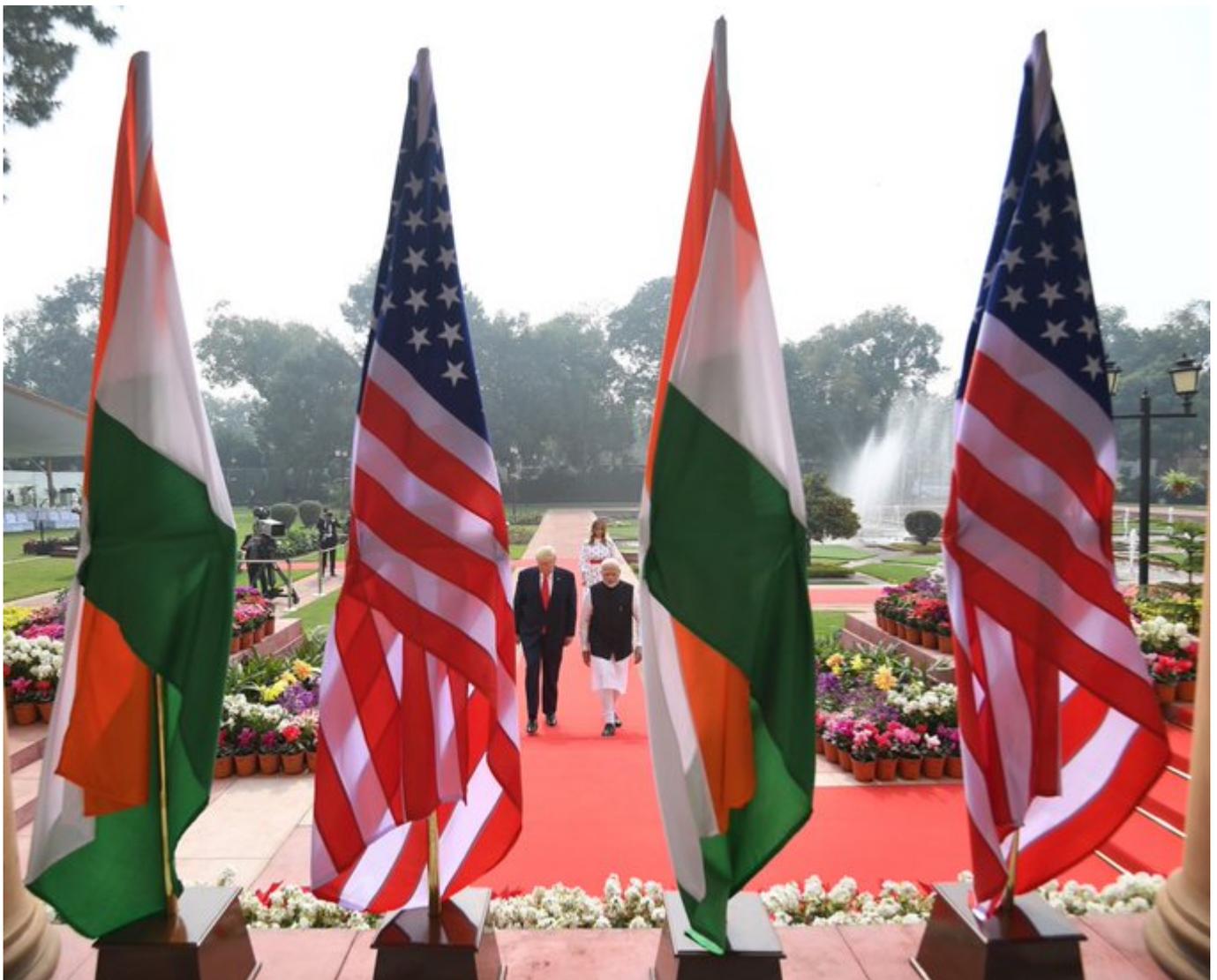
Sailors assigned to the guided-missile destroyer USS Halsey (DDG 97) stand in ranks as the Indian navy destroyer Sapura (F-48) pulls alongside Halsey during a Malabar exercise. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Christopher Farrington/Released)

What has been the defence engagement so far

India and the United States have had a robust defence cooperation post the Cold war, with regular joint military exercises especially naval exercises in the Indo-Pacific waters. India has been a big purchaser of defence equipment like rescue helicopters, fighter planes, high-end submarines and guns from the US, which is the 4th largest supplier of defence equipment to India after Russia, France and Israel. A recognition tag of “Major Defence Partner” by the Donald Trump administration has also been granted to India which has helped in improving bilateral relations between the countries in the area of security.

During the last 2+2 meeting, which was held in December in Washington DC in 2018, both sides signed the Industrial Security Annex (ISA) to the India-US General Security of Military

Information Agreement (GSOMIA) that eased the transfer of high-level technology from the US to India and safeguarding of classified military information. India has so far procured Apache, Chinook and MH-60 Romeo Seahawk helicopters, M777 Howitzer guns, and Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes from the US, among other items. Several other procurements are also in the pipeline, with India now keen to purchase the medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) armed Predator-B drone and other high-tech weapons especially to use them against any aggression that happens with China.



US President Donald Trump with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi/MEA India

Why is it Strategically Important

The Trump administration has in the past called out and condemned Chinese actions in Ladakh and explicitly expressed support for India for the same. The desire to counter China has served as the greatest convergence point in the military policies of both the sovereign democracies. Even with the dicey chances of Trump staying in power, the Joe Biden administration has also pledged to help and support India in its endeavours to counter China in its neighbourhood.

Both the sides have repeatedly acknowledged the global urgency in forming such impactful alliances in an attempt to not let China play out its ambitious mandate. The timing of this virtual meet is also peculiar because a joint statement has been recently released by Pakistan and China who have committed to a strong military partnership and an alliance against India on the Kashmir issue. India has already been an ardent buyer of US military equipment which has risen from 1 billion dollars to around 18 billion dollars in just 10 years from 2008 to 2019.

This new defence framework comes at a time when China has ramped up its defence expenditure and managed to reach the position of the world's largest army in 2020. India is far behind than China and in the unfortunate event of an escalation that might lead to a fully-fledged war, India would need external military support especially with equipment and other machinery. Even with the United States at its weakest with a historic protest against institutional racism and it dealing with a pandemic beyond its healthcare and economic means, it still is a strong alliance to have on the Indian side for its fight against China.

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The 2+2 meeting between India and U.S. – A strategic partnership

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