

# NIRMALA TO GET A HOTLINE WITH MATTIS AS INDIA, US SCALE UP TIES

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**NEWDELHI:** India and the US have agreed to set up a dedicated hotline between their defence ministers for real time communication on global security issues and coordination between the first and the fourth strongest militaries in the world, according to Indian government officials familiar with the matter. An announcement to this effect is expected on September 6 during the so-called two-plus-two dialogue between US secretary of state Mike Pompeo and defence secretary James Mattis with external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and defence minister Nir-mala Sitharaman in New Delhi.

South Block sources said India has agreed to a decade-long US proposal for a dedicated line between the defence leadership of the countries. The basic idea is to cut through bureaucratic red tape and communicate discreetly in matters of bilateral and multi-lateral importance. With both the countries interested in the Indo-Pacific region and happenings in West Asia, the hotline is expected to ensure cogent response from the two major defence allies.

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## Hotline

The hotline was first proposed by the US in 2008 to the then United Progressive Alliance regime but was ignored due to pressure from the Cold war warriors in the Manmohan Singh government, the officials added. There is already a direct line between US National Security Advisor John Bolton and Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

India and US are also expected to finally sign the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) during the two-plus-two dialogue with both sides frenetically working on a mutually acceptable final draft. COMCASA is a foundational military agreement which will allow India to use US communications for its US-built platforms. "The draft of COMCASA is being worked at and the agreement should be ready for initials during the ministerial dialogue," said a senior South Block official.

India has also agreed to place a military officer at the US Central and Pacific Commands for better coordination between the militaries. Which US CENTCOM has both Pakistan and Afghanistan under its jurisdiction, the PACCOM is responsible for the Indo-Pacific region.

The hotline and the signing of COMCASA will further reinforce the ongoing trend of the two countries working closely together. In recent weeks, the US has granted India a status hitherto reserved for NATO member countries to import key defence equipment and access defence technologies, and the two countries have resolved some sticky trade issues. On Monday, US President Donald Trump is expected to sign off on a waiver for India from a US regulation instituting sanctions against countries doing business with Russia, one of India's key suppliers of defence equipment.

"The structural basis of India-US ties has never been better and defence is very much in the lead. Constant communication is central to taking it forward," said S Jaishankar, former foreign secretary of India who has also served as India's ambassador to the US.