

INDIA TO SEEK CLARITY ON RUSSIA WAIVER IN 2+2 TALKS

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NEWDELHI/WASHINGTON: New Delhi will raise American sanctions that can impact India-Russia military ties at the inaugural "2+2" dialogue, Indian officials said on Friday after a top Pentagon official warned there were no guarantees for a special waiver if India signs new arm deals with Russia.

Under current US rules, third countries can face sanctions for deals with Russia's defence or intelligence sectors. President Donald Trump recently signed a defence spending bill that amended the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to grant waivers against certain conditions that India fulfills easily.

Reacting to remarks by Randall Schriver, the Pentagon's assistant secretary of defence for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, two Indian officials said India has made it clear to the US that it won't allow military ties with Russia to be derailed by the sanctions.

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Defence buys

The officials said CAATSA and its impact on India's military readiness is "a matter of continuing discussions between India and the US". Aspects related to the US sanctions will be discussed at the 2+2 talks on September 6, one of the officials said.

"India has conveyed to the US that the sanctions legislation cannot be allowed to derail India-Russia military ties. And they are sensitive to our concerns, given the widespread use of Russian weapons in our military," the official added.

Addressing an audience at the Carnegie Endowment For International Peace in Washington on Wednesday, Schriver said the waiver authority had created the impression the US would insulate India "from any fallout from this legislation no matter what they do". He added, "I would say that's a bit misleading.

"We would still have very significant concerns if India pursued major new platforms and systems (from Russia). I can't sit here and tell you that they would be exempt, that we would use that waiver," Schriver said ahead of the 2+2 dialogue that will see his boss, defence secretary Jim Mattis, and secretary of state Mike Pompeo meeting their Indian counterparts.

Schriver conceded Mattis himself "did plea for an exception for India" but added he couldn't guarantee "a waiver will be used for future purchases".

Mattis and Pompeo had strongly urged US Congress for a clearer exemption for India and a few other countries under CAATSA, a 2017 law that seeks to punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea and interference in the 2016 US elections.

Russia continues to account for more than 60% of the hardware and equipment used by India's armed forces despite moves by New Delhi to source military gear from other sources such as the US and Israel.

India, the world's top defence importer, plans to buy five S-400 missile defence systems from Russia for around \$4.5 billion.

Ashley Tellis, a former state department official who played a key role in the signing of the

India-US nuclear deal, argued in an article published on Thursday the enactment of the waiver provision was “misread” in India as a waiver in the bag.

The provision only grants the President the authority to waive, but, he added, “there is not yet any evidence that he will do so”. He pointed out that despite the perception of Trump’s “fondness for (Russian President Vladimir) Putin, he is opposed to the proliferation of S-400 systems globally”.

Trump’s “antipathy toward the S-400...extends to acquisitions across the globe, whether by putative adversaries such as China, treaty allies such as Turkey, or emerging partners such as India”, he added.