

PUTIN IN DELHI TO INK DEFENCE PACT AMID US THREAT

New friend & old partner, India tries to please both

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New Delhi: As India and Russia prepare to sign a deal for S-400 missile defence systems on Friday, New Delhi is playing the greatest balancing act of all — steering its defence needs and a long standing strategic relationship with Russia past the threat of US sanctions while protecting growing ties with Washington.

It wasn't this bad even during the Cold War, when despite cries of non-alignment, India was squarely on the Russian side of the field and the US did not see New Delhi as an ally.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin landed in Delhi on Thursday evening and drove straight to a dinner with PM Narendra Modi. The official programme begins on Friday morning with a breakfast followed by delegation-level talks. A large number of agreements are likely to be signed — normal for India-Russia summits.

But all eyes will be on the defence agreements for the S-400 missile defence system, frigates and assault rifles. The US only last week slapped sanctions on China for buying the same S-400s.

Putin's visit comes almost exactly a month after the first 2+2 dialogue with the US, where James Mattis and Mike Pompeo had discussed this scenario with Nirmala Sitharaman and Sushma Swaraj. India made it clear it needed the S-400 and had a long legacy of sourcing defence equipment from Russia, which New Delhi was unwilling to compromise. The US side reassured Delhi that the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) law would not apply to legacy platforms or spares, but new buys could be impacted.



OLD ALLY: Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets Russian President Vladimir Putin ahead of their talks in New Delhi on Thursday

What is less known is that Mattis and Pompeo spent over an hour with national security advisor Ajit Doval for a deeper conversation on two issues — imports of Iranian oil post sanctions that will kick in from November 4, and the S-400 from Russia. Sources said both sides emerged with a better understanding of each other.

The Trump administration, however, still has to certify to Congress that India is reducing its weapons buys from Russia. That is a condition for a waiver on CAATSA, a provision written into the otherwise inflexible law by sustained diplomacy by the Trump administration. The waiver will be available to India, Indonesia and Vietnam. But, as Randy Shriver, US undersecretary in the Pentagon said, India should not treat this as a blanket waiver.

India is in a slightly difficult place — the US relationship is vital for India to balance China and its aggressive growth. It's also the economic partner of choice for Indian industry. Russia, however, remains an old partner, with a huge piece of the Indian defence pie. But its closeness to China is a problem that India

is uncomfortable about.

India has been reducing its weapons buys from Russia, but it does not want to ditch their deep partnership. In fact, India has increased its investments in Russia's energy sector with oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan officially asking Russia to partner in India's effort to gasify its economy.

Russia is also opposed to India's Indo-Pacific policy, and has unequivocally opposed it. "We urge all our allies and partners to forgo transactions with Russia that would trigger sanctions under CAATSA," a state department spokesperson said on Wednesday when asked about India's plan to purchase the multi-billion S-400 missile defence system. "The administration has indicated that a focus area for the implementation of CAATSA Section 231 is new or qualitative upgrades in capability, including the S-400 air and missiles," the spokesperson said.

Russia enjoys support from across the political spectrum — for instance, Sonia Gandhi, who doesn't travel too much, went out of her way to travel to St Petersburg recently for a women's conference.