

2+2 talks set strategic direction for Indo-US ties

Pact With US Defence Unit A Big Takeaway

New Delhi: The '2+2' dialogue, held for the first time at the foreign and defence ministers' level, set India's strategic direction firmly with the US. Held after two delays, sources in the Indian government indicated they had reasons to feel satisfied.

While signing the COMCASA with the US, a landmark agreement that has huge implications for India-US defence and security relations, India persisted in its demand for a 'Make in India' component for defence trade with the US. Ministers Nirmala Sitharaman and Swaraj made another pitch with the US for the defence relationship to be more than a "buyer-seller" one. The US reluctantly agreed to put this in the joint statement, which said, the two countries "committed to explore other



US secretary of defence James Mattis and secretary of state Mike Pompeo with their Indian counterparts Sushma Swaraj and Nirmala Sitharaman during the recently held '2+2' meeting

means to support further expansion in two-way trade in defence items and defence manufacturing supply chain linkages." Whether this becomes an ultimate reality or not will depend on how defence manufacturing takes off in India, and whether there is any traction in the US defence industry for components from India.

Despite the COMCASA signalling much closer cooperation between India and US, the Indians wanted to maintain their "autonomous" space. Accordingly, the joint statement described the "two countries

are strategic partners, major and independent stakeholders in world affairs."

A big takeaway was the pact with the US' Defense Innovation Unit — unlike in the past when the US' DARPA was at the cutting edge of innovation which then spread to the civilian world, more and more innovations today are being made in the civilian sector, in Silicon Valley, which could have defence and security applications. With this agreement, India will have a presence in this unit in Silicon Valley, hoping to do its bit for

the next-generation innovation in defence technology.

Three India-specific formulations distinguished the COMCASA from the CISMOA — there would be no disruption during the life cycle of the equipment; the India data generated would not be disclosed or transferred, and national security concerns would be addressed. While the purchase of S-400 missile defence systems from Russia was not raised by the Indian side, the US side indicated that India would not be sanctioned for its legacy platforms. But fresh purchases would fall under the purview of CAATSA. That would be a potential problem.

India might be able to wrangle a carve-out for the Chahbahar port, but oil imports would come under the scanner. Most important, there is no pact on the trade troubles that have persisted with the Trump administration. The government will be sending another delegation of officials to see if they can cobble together a package trade deal. Trump would be against it, particularly as he railed against subsidies for India.