

2+2 DIALOGUE: CHINA'S RISING INFLUENCE IN INDO-PACIFIC

India, US mull working with Oz, Japan, ASEAN to secure region

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

With China increasingly asserting its presence in the Indo-Pacific, India and the US in their first 2+2 dialogue have discussed engagement with Japan, Australia and ASEAN nations to secure the seas and the skies in the region, a senior Trump administration official has said.

External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman held the crucial talks with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary James Mattis in New Delhi on September 6.

While China claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have counter claims over the area.

China recently deployed anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-surface missile systems in the disputed South China Sea amid frequent forays by US naval and surveillance aircraft over the region to assert the freedom of navigation.

In a conference call with reporters on Monday, Alice Wells, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, said during the discussion, China's reference came up "most in the context of the vision the



two nations (India and US) have for the Indo-Pacific region, which excludes no nation."

The US has about \$1.4 billion in trade with the Indo-Pacific, over \$850 billion in foreign direct investment.

"So the conversations between the two countries during the 2+2 Dialogue were how they can bilaterally, tri-laterally with Japan and quadrilaterally with Australia and with the ASEAN can we work to promote economic security and good governance and security of the seas and the skies," Wells said.

"We discussed the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity for the US and India to be able to offer countries alternatives for development, alternatives for how they're going to pursue significant infrastructure pro-

jects and how they're going to work to be able to create a free and open trading system that has advanced all the countries of the world since post World War-II," she said.

Wells said the US and India welcome contributions by China to regional development as long as it adhere to high standards where there's transparency, rule of law and sustainable financing.

"But instead what we see is an opportunity to use private sectors to contribute meaningfully to development of the region," she said.

Responding to a question on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Wells said, "We have been talking about principles for the supportive infrastructure development and having our experts at all levels engaged."