

# Doval talks future direction with US after 2+2 success

**WASHINGTON VISIT** NSA meets counterpart along with Pompeo, Mattis as both sides seek to build on strategic gains from 'historic' 2+2

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**NEW DELHI/WASHINGTON:** National security advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval held talks about the future of bilateral ties with the US in a string of meetings with top American officials on Friday, including with his counterpart John Bolton, as India pressed its case for the purchase of Russian-made S-400 missile systems.

India conveyed to the US that the integrity of American military platforms in service with the Indian Air Force (IAF) and future acquisitions will not be compromised if New Delhi goes ahead with the purchase, backing its case with technical arguments.

The NSA travelled to Washington to convey Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of the future direction of Indo-US ties. On the eve of the 2+2 dialogue, Modi shared his vision with external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj, defence minister Nirjala Sitharaman and NSA Doval.

Sitharaman is expected to travel to Washington, after President Putin's October visit to India, for a bilateral engagement with secretary Mattis. The dates of Sitharaman's visit are being worked out and she is expected to travel to Washington not before November.

At Doval's meetings with the three US principals, the two coun-



■ Ajit Doval

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tries "reviewed" the progress in ties and also looked at "regional and global developments" in North Korea, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, West Asia and the Indo-Pacific. India and US are seeking convergence on their views on stability of Kabul regime with President Ashraf Ghani arriving in Delhi on September 19.

It has been decided that the principals from India and the US will bilaterally engage with their counterparts apart from the 2+2 dialogue. Prior to NSA Doval's visit, a high-level Indian Air

Force technical team led by an air marshal was in the Pentagon last month to convince US officials of measures India will take to ensure that electronic signatures of US aerial platforms are not shared even if it acquires the S-400 system from Russia.

The meeting with Bolton was Doval's first engagement and was described as a "good first meeting" by an official who didn't want to be named. Bolton took office in April, and the two officials hadn't had a chance to meet before their talks on Friday. Doval also met secretary of state Michael Pompeo and secretary of defense James Mattis, for the second time in as many weeks. He had met them in Delhi after their 2+2 ministerial with their Indian counterparts Swaraj and Sitharaman on September 6.

"The discussions were general and broad-based," said the official cited above, "following up on the 2+2 and looking at the future direction of the strategic relationship."

Doval's key task is to convince the Trump administration that the proposed S-400 deal does merit a US presidential waiver from the provisions of Countering America's Adversaries Through the Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and that India will reduce its crude oil purchases from Iran before the November 4 sanctions kick in.

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## India-US

India's has cited its 70-year history of military hardware acquisitions from Russia. More than 64% of Indian military inventory is from Russia.

The NSA travelled to the US ahead of a visit next month to India by Russian President Vladimir Putin and a possible deal on S-400 missile system on October 5.

A waiver of CAATSA by President Donald Trump is essential because, in its absence, US defence contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon and Sirkorsky, which are supplying critical equipment to India like the C-17, C-130J transport aircraft, Apache and Chinook helicopters, will come under sanctions.

Both sides have described the 2+2 in glowing terms as "historic" and not simply because it was the first meeting of the four principals in this format, which the United States has with only its closest allies.

"Last week, I did go to India for what could only be considered highly successful consultations between the world's two largest democracies," Mattis said to reporters on his return. "There (were) no difficulties that we uncovered there in moving forward on a number of pragmatic steps to draw ourselves closer together in terms of security."

And, he added: "It was a -- it was a very heartening trip, historic I'd even say" and "a defining moment for the relationship".

The secretary of defense specially mentioned the signing for COMCASA—Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement—that allows India access to all defense-related US communications systems, enhancing defense trade and interoperability between the two militaries.

Indian ambassador to the United States Navtej Sarna accompanied the NSA to these meetings..

Bolton is Doval's third US counterpart, following Michael Flynn and HR McMaster. The Indian NSA had had meetings with both Flynn and McMaster within days of their appointment respectively. Flynn didn't last

long enough in the job, but his successor, McMaster became the first senior-level Trump administration official to visit India, in April, 2017, just days after his meeting with Doval in Washington DC.

NSA Doval's visits to the US are generally low-profile and neither side has had much to say about them and, specially, the specifics. There were no readouts from India or the United States about his three meetings on Friday, except a mention in the state department's public schedule of events and engagements — about his meeting with secretary Pompeo.

While India is all for engaging Russia and China for better relations, it is clear in its mind that this will not be at the cost of India-US deep ties or vice versa. Perhaps the S-400 will turn out to be a classic example how close allies could handle tricky issues.