



THE US-INDIA 2+2 DIALOGUE: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

BY PRATEEK JOSHI

Prateek Joshi (prateekjoshi.2812@gmail.com) is a research associate with VIF India, a New Delhi based public policy think tank.

The conclusion of the first [2+2 dialogue](#) between the United States and India takes their bilateral relationship to a new level. Challenges remain, but over the next few years Washington and New Delhi will become closer security partners.

The meeting will help strengthen bilateral defense ties between the two countries, expand bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation, promote people-to-people connections, and boost all forms of bilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Of these successes, the latter has received the most attention. This is evidence of Washington's strong commitment to the development of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," which has been a major foreign-policy focus after the Trump administration elevated the region to a "[top-level regional priority](#)" in the 2017 *National Security Strategy*.

The highlight of the dialogue was the signing of the much-awaited Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the Indian version of the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA). This agreement paves the way for procuring much-needed encrypted communications systems for US-origin platforms (C-17 *Globemaster*, C-130J *Super Hercules*, and P-8I *Poseidon* aircraft) operated by Indian forces, thereby eliminating the commercially-sourced, and mostly unsecure communication systems currently in use. Indian Navy's ships will be able to [access](#) the Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange

System (CENTRIXS) used by the US combatant commands.

The "interoperability" aspect of COMCASA will also work as a force-multiplier for India's maritime projection in the region, with direct geostrategic implications as the Indian Navy's capabilities are enhanced. Most importantly, "Indian ships will be able to exchange real-time data to and from the US platforms, enabling India to monitor Chinese movements in the IOR," according to a senior naval expert. While the US and Indian navies have enjoyed close cooperation for many years, the absence of COMCASA meant that any transfer of information from US platforms would reach their Indian counterparts only after the Indian Navy processed it, creating a time-lag in India's information-gathering or threat-mapping capabilities. The same problem exists for satellite tracking. The agreement will also facilitate resource-pooling between the United States and India for greater information-gathering. Further, the P-8I's capabilities will be augmented as the planes will be equipped with Data Link-11 and Link-16, "[through which](#) the P-8I alerts friendly naval forces about enemy submarines."

COMCASA will enable seamless intelligence-sharing between the US and Indian navies. Also, the common practice of temporarily installing US communication systems for use during bilateral exercises will no longer be needed once Indian platforms acquire them permanently. This development is consistent with Washington's efforts to set up an integrated information-sharing channel among its expanding network of coalition partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Another development that has received less attention was the [commitment](#) "to start exchanges between the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Indian Navy." The focus on the Western Indian Ocean points toward a more holistic approach by the United States and India on the Indo-Pacific. More importantly, it is expected to alter the prevailing discourse that gave a narrow interpretation to the Indo-Pacific as a concept where US maritime interests were focused in East Asia.

There are limits to growing US-India cooperation, however. For starters, it has taken approximately 16

years to conclude this agreement since the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002, and two years since the US-India Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Understanding. This is due to many factors, ranging from Indian foreign policymaking, which is traditionally slow and overly cautious, to domestic challenges in the lead-up to signing the agreement. New Delhi, after all, was always ambivalent about this agreement, up until this year: the dialogue was postponed [twice in 2018](#), despite a clear commitment from Washington, which recognized India as a Major Defense Partner in 2016, granting it the Strategic Trade Authorization (STA-1) license exemption status.

More importantly, despite the growing strategic alignment between New Delhi and Washington, India has, and will continue to have, close relationships with powers at odds with the United States, notably Russia, China, and Iran. This is potentially problematic.

Navigating through the challenges

Because Tehran handed over its Chabahar port's facilities to an Indian entity to commence operations, and because India's oil imports from Iran [constituted](#) 10.4 percent of its total oil purchases in 2017-2018, it is unclear whether India will agree with US demands to cut oil imports from Iran. Despite India's [surging](#) crude imports from the United States to substitute for Iranian crude, it is still [very difficult](#) to bring Iranian oil imports to zero by [this November](#), as desired by Washington.

Another challenge is the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), 2017, which looms large as India plans to buy Russia's S-400 missiles defense system and raises important questions for the Russia-India defense partnership as a whole. While the Pentagon [refused](#) to guarantee that India would be exempted from sanctions, the National Defense Authorization Act Conference report (published last July) provided mild hints regarding a "[modified waiver](#)" to India. But during the 2+2 dialogue, the United States remained [non-committal](#) on India's concerns regarding its dealings with Russia and Iran.

Since the acquisition of force-multiplier capabilities through COMCASA will enable the Indian Navy to track Chinese developments closely, a major question is how Beijing will react, especially as China-India relations have improved considerably after the recent Wuhan Summit, as is evident from a sharp increase in defense delegation visits, and Beijing's recent approval to [import](#) Indian rice. New Delhi took the latter decision as a positive gesture to allow greater market access to Indian goods. Watch how these recent developments are communicated to, and received by, the Chinese side in the next India-China maritime dialogue. Also bear in mind that the decision to explore venues of cooperation with CENTCOM could alarm Islamabad and prompt greater naval collaboration between China and Pakistan. Although a distant thought, Pakistan's insecurities could stem from the mere thought of Washington and New Delhi sharing data on Pakistan Navy's movements.

Institutionalizing cooperation between the United States and India has been slow. Today, however, it is on an upward trajectory, owing much to New Delhi's quest to carve out a position in the region. The culmination of the recent dialogue and Washington's flexibility in tailoring the agreements (both LEMOA and COMCASA) to accommodate New Delhi's concerns demonstrates a US commitment to deeper cooperation.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.