

# Press Releases: Previewing the Upcoming U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue

Special Briefing  
Senior Administration Officials  
Via Teleconference  
August 30, 2018

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**MODERATOR:** Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining today's call on the upcoming United States-India 2+2 ministerial dialogue. As a reminder, today's call is on background. For your own situational awareness, joining us today [is] [Senior Administration Official One], who will be referred to as Senior Administration Official Number One. And joining him [is] [Senior Administration Official Two], who will be referred to as Senior Administration Official Number Two.

I'll now turn it over to our senior administration officials, who will open our call with brief remarks. Senior Administration Official Number One, thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Thank you. Thank you for joining me; I'm very pleased to preview the upcoming 2+2 ministerial dialogue, which will take place on September 6th in New Delhi. And we'd just like to acknowledge upfront really the close cooperation between the Departments of State and Defense in organizing U.S. participation in this event.

The 2+2 is a major opportunity to enhance our engagement with India on critical diplomatic and security priorities. I know that Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mattis are honored to be making – excuse me, Secretary Pompeo is honored to be making his first trip to India as Secretary of State for such an important event. I should also add that we are grateful to External Affairs Minister Swaraj, Defense Minister Sitharaman, and the Indian Government for their partnership in this effort.

The Secretary's travel in tandem with Secretary Mattis is a strong indication of the deepening strategic partnership between the United States and India, and of India's emergence as an important security provider in the region. India's central role in our National Security Strategy is enshrined in the President's National Security Strategy as well as the administration's South Asia and Indo-Pacific strategies.

So that's my first message, that the relationship with India is a key U.S.

priority and integral to our national security.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize that we have a very full and ambitious agenda for the 2+2, including advancing our shared vision for the Indo-Pacific. As democracies bookending the Indo-Pacific region, the United States and India share an interest in promoting security and prosperity in this region. Together and with other like-minded partners, we want to ensure the freedom of the seas and skies, promote market economics, support good governance, and insulate sovereign nations from external coercion.

As you know, the India – the United States, excuse me, declared India a major defense partner in 2016, a status unique to India, and operationalizing that status will also be an important part of our discussion at the 2+2. We expect progress and further deepening the ties between our two militaries and creating a framework for greater information sharing and interoperability. We are also eager to expand defense trade, which is estimated to reach 18 billion by 2019 from essentially zero in 2008. To support this goal, the U.S. Government recently granted India Strategy Trade Authority Tier 1 designation, which enables U.S. companies to export dual-use items to India under a more streamlined, licensed process.

We also will use the 2+2 to further advance our expanding counterterrorism cooperation.

I would like to briefly touch on our economic relationship with India, because it remains a key pillar of our partnership. The United States and India expanded bilateral trade by 12 billion last year, reaching 126 billion in 2017. We want to continue to grow the trade relationship to our mutual benefit, but to ensure the trade is fair and reciprocal. It is no surprise that tariff and non-tariff barriers have been the subject of longstanding concern, and the U.S. Government is working with the Government of India to address market access challenges.

Finally, I just want to acknowledge the importance of the strong people-to-people ties that bind the United States and India. From the 186,000 Indian students at U.S. colleges and universities to the deep links between our companies, scientists, and academics, to the over 3 million Indian Americans making such important contributions to our country, these people-to-people ties create a foundation of trust and understanding that make conversations like the 2+2 so fruitful.

So I'll stop there and would be happy to take your questions.

**OPERATOR:** Ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to ask a question, please press \*1 at this time. You may remove yourself from queue at any time by pressing the # key. Once again, for questions, press \*1. And we'll wait just a moment for the first question.

And we will go to the line of Susannah George with AP. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi there. Thank you so much for doing this call. Will secondary sanctions, specifically India's purchases of Iranian oil, be a subject of

talks during the trip?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So we plan to discuss a number of different ways to increase our diplomatic, security, and military cooperation to confront pressing regional, global concerns, but I don't want to at this point speculate or foresee the details of the topics that will be discussed. I will say, however, that we have been discussing regularly with India issues related to both Iran and CAATSA and are looking, as with other partners, to identify ways to cooperate to support our policy goals with regard to both those issues.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next we will go to the line of Gardiner Harris with *New York Times*. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi guys, thanks for doing this call again. It's been widely reported in the Indian media that the summit between Modi and Trump in November was a disaster. It's also been widely reported that President Trump made fun of Prime Minister Modi's accent, and there have been times on TV when he mimics an Indian accent. Is that a problem for the relationship or are you going to deal with that at all, the sort of – the Trump effect?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So I take issue with the fundamental premise. The two leaders had, actually, a great meeting back in June of last year, and in fact, it was at that session that they decided to undertake this 2+2 dialogue to create this new venue for us to deepen our security and defense cooperation. And I know that President Trump is strongly committed to the relationship with India, I know that the prime minister values very much the engagements, interactions he's had with the President, and that strong connection between our two leaders is really what is helping to animate both our bureaucracies to make sure that we continue to make strong progress, including through the 2+2. I would also –

**QUESTION:** But [Senior Administration Official One], they met again in November at the ASEAN meeting too, didn't they? It wasn't just Modi here in June.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So yes, that's correct. It was – again, I cited that first summit meeting because it's – again, it's relevant to the 2+2. That's where they agreed to undertake this new mechanism. But they have indeed met on a number of occasions and spoken by phone, and also would like to note the fact that the prime minister was very eager and happy to welcome Ivanka Trump to India in November when the U.S. and India co-hosted the Global Entrepreneurship Summit.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next we will go to the line of Thomas Watkins with AFP. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hello. Thank you for doing this. Can you – just going back – kind of a follow on the first question, can you give us an update on where things

are with India and its prospective purchase of the S-400, and can you also tell us if there are any other prospective Russian arms deals that you're concerned about from India and what – how those concerns will be raised and what you'll be – what level they'll be discussed at the 2+2? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So again, I'm not really in a position to speak to any of the individual topics and subjects that may come up during the conversations, but I will say just on the subject of CAATSA, I think as you referenced, the Trump administration fully committed to implementing CAATSA, including section 231. We have discussed CAATSA with the Government of India along with other partners, and we continue to look for ways to work with India and other countries to help them identify and avoid engaging in potentially sanctionable activities.

**QUESTION:** But can you give an update on where the actual – where the process is? I'm sorry for my ignorance, but in terms of where India is on the S-400 purchase.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So I would – I'd really refer you to the Government of India for the question about the status of any procurements they may have.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next we will go to the line of Aziz Haniffa with *India Abroad*. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, [Senior Administration Official One], for doing this call. In terms of some of the earlier questions, is the CAATSA waiver by the Congress a done deal? And do you foresee any problems coming up with the India deal with Russia on this front?

And how concerned are you, even more than Russia, as to where India's very close relationship with Iran would figure into the sanctions regime?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So thank you for that question. So with regard to the waiver, there is obviously no country-specific waiver in the new legislation. There are no blanket waivers that will be issued for any one countries – any one country, excuse me – and any waiver that we might contemplate for significant transaction with Russia would be assessed on a case-by-case basis and would require, among other things, countries to significantly reduce their reliance on Russian arms.

And with regard to Iran, I'll say that, again, as I noted I think in the past, we continue to discuss our Iran policy with our Indian counterparts and speak to them, certainly, about the implications of our re-imposition of sanctions previously lifted or waived under the JCPOA. And just to reiterate, as you all know, the President has made very clear that the United States is fully committed to enforce all our sanctions, and that starting on November 5th sanctions on Iran's energy sector, Central Bank of Iran, and Iran's shipping sectors will come into effect.

And we know that India and other countries around the world certainly share

our concern about the urgency of addressing the full range of Iranian malign behavior, and we're closely – we're looking for ways to remain closely engaged with India in finding a way forward to end Iran's destabilizing behavior. We also have been quite clear in informing other governments when we speak about CAATSA to explain the risks of running afoul of CAATSA. That's an important part of our messaging as well.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next, we will go to the line of Seema Sirohi with *The Economic Times* in India. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi. [Senior Administration Official], I wanted to ask about the discussions with the Taliban. And was India kept in the loop about that, and will this come up for discussion in the 2+2?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So, again, not going to speculate about the diplomatic conversation that will take place at the 2+2. I will say, however, that we consult extremely closely with India on Afghanistan. The South Asia strategy acknowledges and highlights India's important role to play. We are certainly welcoming and grateful for India's significant economic and development assistance provided to Afghanistan, over \$3 billion that's been pledged, and again, welcome the fact that our countries have shared interest in Afghanistan. I think we'll continue to work closely towards our shared goals.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next, we'll go to the line of Nike Ching with VOA. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**OPERATOR:** Next, we will go to the line of Emily Tamkin with BuzzFeed. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you for this. So you mentioned people-to-people ties, and there's been some frustration over U.S. immigration policy, particularly how the stamps, current stamps on H1-B visas, is falling heavily on Indian citizens. Do you expect that to come up? If it were to come up, how would you – I know you don't forecast discussions, but how would you address it? And how is immigration generally factoring into this, this talk or this meeting?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So I will say that the Trump administration's executive order has called for a broad review of U.S. worker visa program known as H1-B in the interests of ensuring that they are administered in a way that doesn't disadvantage U.S. workers or wages. But there has been no change to the processing of H1-B visas, so it's really impossible for me to speculate on the outcome and any possible changes to the

system. It is obviously an issue that is important to India. They're the largest beneficiary of H1-B – of H1-B program, and it's an issue which we – they regularly raise with us and we're regularly discussing with them. But again, just highlight the fact that no changes to the program to date.

**MODERATOR:** Next question.

**OPERATOR:** Next, we'll go to the line of Yashwant Raj with *Hindustan Times*. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, hi. Secretary Mattis was – a couple of days ago at a news briefing at the Pentagon said India and the U.S. expect to sign some – finalize some agreements at the 2+2. Can you discuss what agreements, how many, and is COMCASA going to be one of them? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** So yeah, maybe I can speak to some of that. So we've made some encouraging progress is one of our key enabling agreements, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement. We've had several rounds of negotiations and we're encouraged by the progress we've made. And at the 2+2 it'll be discussed, and we'll see how far we get. But we're very encouraged by the progress we've made in that particularly key enabling agreement which will allow us to increase our interoperability between both U.S. and India, and India with its other systems, and open up a much bigger range of options to acquire advanced technology.

**QUESTION:** Any specifics about the other agreements that the Secretary was referring to, could have been referring to?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** So I wouldn't say they're a formal agreement. We're going to discuss proposals to increase maritime domain awareness, defense innovation. We're looking at potentially collaborating with some of our defense innovation efforts in the United States, our Defense Innovation Unit for example, and discuss proposals to enhance bilateral defense cooperation. So those are – those would be just an example of some of the proposals that we're going to discuss at the meeting.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Go to the next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next we'll go to the line of Reena Bhardwaj with ANI. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you for doing this call. My question is on Maldives. Do you think there would be any discussions in the 2+2 on Maldives and its upcoming elections?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So again, I'm sorry to be repeating myself, but I really don't want to go into specifics of what these private diplomatic discussions may cover.

**MODERATOR:** Next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Next we will go to the line of Nike Ching with VOA. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much for the call. A quick follow-up of Susannah's question. Did India make any specific commitment to cut oil purchase from Iran, and would the United States consider a waiver to Indian companies that continue to buy oil from Iran? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** So I will just say that I noted that on the 5th of November we will reimpose a number of those sanctions. And with regard to oil imports, our goal remains to get to zero oil imports from Iran as quickly as possible, ideally by November 4th, and we are prepared to work with countries that are reducing their imports on a case-by-case basis.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. This is our final question. Thank you.

**OPERATOR:** And that will come from the line of Seema Sirohi with *Economic Times* in India. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask [Senior Administration Official Two] a question. Yesterday, Randy Schriver basically said that the U.S. wants to wean India away from Russian defense systems and especially the S-400. Is the U.S. willing to offer something that matches the S-400's capabilities, and if so, would that be part of this dialogue?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** As [Senior Administration Official One] said, I really can't discuss the S-400 specifically, but I can say in general terms we've made great progress with India as a Major Defense Partner to create the conditions where we can offer much more advanced technology. I mentioned in the previous question the progress we've made on the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, the COMCASA. That's one example of the type of enabling agreement that'll allow us to provide India or offer India some of our most advanced technology. Now, certainly India is going to make its decisions based on its interests, but we're encouraged that increasingly more capable U.S.-sourced technology can be among their choices.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you, all. That concludes today's call. As a reminder, today's call was on background. You may refer to the two speakers today as Senior Administration Official One and Senior Administration Official Two. Thank you all for joining. Bye-bye.

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