The United States and India will engage in our first “2+2 Dialogue” on September 6 in New Delhi, bringing together the heads of our respective defense and foreign ministries. This is the “successor” to the U.S.-India Strategic and Commercial Dialogue (S&CD). The S&CD met twice—in 2015 and 2016—never quite hitting its stride in terms of deepening our partnership on either the strategic or commercial relationship. The timing is critical; bilateral relations are in a trough, largely due to a range of trade concerns. The September 6 2+2 Dialogue must focus on three objectives:

1. Determine specific, tangible ways to reinforce our emerging security partnership;
2. Prevent trade concerns from derailing our security ties; and
3. De-escalate the risk that U.S. sanctions against Russia and Iran pose to our growing ties with India.

Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson painted an aspirational vision of our emerging Indo-Pacific partnership at his October 18, 2017 speech at CSIS, stating:

“The U.S. and India, with our shared goals of peace, security, freedom of navigation, and a free and open architecture, must serve as the Eastern and Western beacons of the Indo-Pacific, as the port and starboard lights between which the region can reach its greatest and best potential.”

The United States and India have intensified security cooperation in recent years. Notable milestones include renewing and expanding our 10-year Defense Framework Agreement (2015); Signing the “Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region” (2015); launching a series of programs under the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) (2015); including Japan in the annual Malabar naval exercise (2015); completing the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (2016); and lifting U.S. export controls on maritime surveillance drones (2017). Other similar agreements are on the table, such as signing two other pending “enabling agreements,” expanding military exercises, concluding agreements related to our aircraft carrier and jet engine working groups, pre-approving the export of additional advanced military technologies, and more.
**Why the New Format?**

The U.S.-India Strategic and Commercial Dialogue never quite fulfilled its promise as a tool to deepen U.S.-India ties. At the time, the U.S. Department of Defense had a far higher degree of senior-level engagement with India on strategic affairs. Despite some notable small-scale successes, the two sides were unable to craft a vision for high-level economic cooperation. Discussions were still focused on attempts to resolve a range of smaller commercial disputes, instead of setting a course and vision for something larger.

Switching to this new 2+2 format will help both sides ensure that the defense and foreign policy arms of our respective governments are acting in greater consonance. America’s nascent “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” construct will have elements of diplomacy and military power. Having a regular minister-level engagement will force both sides to initiate a higher-degree of joint planning than if such a dialogue did not exist. This dialogue should expedite approvals for technology release in the United States, advance joint diplomatic coordination across the region, and reduce opportunities for miscommunications between our defense and foreign ministries that could otherwise slow progress in the relationship.

The relatively positive state of our security relationship must be the ballast that sees us through the current tumult in our economic relationship. There is blame to be cast on both sides for the declining ties. India’s tariff increases announced on February 1 were quietly the first tangible protectionist step between the two sides. More recently, the United States has turned aggressor, leveling trade actions that specifically target India, as well as other actions with broader application that also hit India. Now India is counteracting with U.S.-specific tariffs of its own. U.S. sanctions programs against Russia and Iran include provisions that extend to countries with strategic economic engagement with these two nations. India has both; Russia continues to be a major weapons supplier, while Iran is a key oil supplier. Congress has widened the potential application of waivers on Russian sanctions, so the pathway to clearing this hurdle seems to have improved in recent days.

**Conclusion**

No matter who is in a bilateral meeting, outcomes are a mixture of interests, capabilities, and energy. We can certainly lament the continued lack of a shared vision for the direction of our commercial partnership. But even with a ministerial-level “Strategic and Commercial Dialogue,” our nations were not able to bridge our many differences. The 2+2 Dialogue on September 6 is a crucial opportunity to put our relationship on a more positive track. As the more aggressive of the two, the onus is on the United States to offer a path to de-escalation.

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