

THE FIFTH ANNUAL INDIA-U.S. 2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

Indian Minister for External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar and Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh hosted U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin between November 9-10, 2023, for the fifth annual 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue to strengthen India-U.S. bilateral strategic relations.¹ At the conclusion of the Dialogue, the Indian Minister of External Affairs tweeted that the agenda of their meeting covered “advancing our strategic partnership, including elevating our defence ties, moving forward in space & tech, future logistics cooperation and people-to-people contacts. Also exchanged perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, South Asia, West Asia and Ukraine conflict. Reaffirmed commitment to our collaboration in the multilateral arena and engaging the Global South.”² The visit was a follow-up and review of the June 2023 Roadmap for U.S.-India Defense Industrial Cooperation launched during the three-day state visit to the U.S. by PM Modi between 22-23 June 2023 in order to enhance interoperability between both militaries. Despite New Delhi’s limited global approach, the fifth 2+2 Ministerial

¹ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on the Fifth Annual India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue” press release, November 10, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-fifth-annual-india-u-s-22-ministerial-dialogue/>

² Dr. S. Jaishankar, “Concluded a substantive India-US 2+2 Ministerial Meeting,” *Twitter*, November 10, 2023, <https://twitter.com/drsjaishankar/status/1722911714205905162?s=12>

Dialogue demonstrated that the U.S. has maintained a benevolent posture towards India under a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership.

General Electric Deals and Delays

The Dialogue apprised of the agreement between General Electric (GE) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) signed during the Indian Prime Minister's state visit to the U.S. in June 2023. The agreement to co-produce GE's F414 jet engines, which will power India's indigenously manufactured Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mark-II, received approval from the U.S. Congress in August 2023.³ The critical issue of export control and delays in delivery were raised during the 2+2 Dialogue. Indian defence sources believe that the process of co-production, which is supposed to start in March 2024, might face delays. They believe so due to delays in the delivery of 99 F404 jet engines for LAC Tejas Mark-I, a predecessor of Tejas Mark-II, a deal worth \$716 million signed in 2021.⁴ Though 75 F404 engines have been delivered, the delay in the remaining 99 engines has raised concerns in Indian defence authorities. The Indian Defence Research Wing (IDRW) has highlighted that the delivery of the jet engines for Tejas Mark-I was scheduled to begin in August 2023, but it has not commenced even till November.⁵ They have questioned why GE cannot meet the Indian demands when it is clearly meeting South Korea's. IDRW believe that a delay in the delivery timeline would consequentially delay the delivery of aircraft to the Indian Air Force that is scheduled for 2029.⁶ Though the governments in Washington and New Delhi are progressively advancing their defence ties, defence quarters in India seem unsatisfied with the progress achieved so far.

New Defence Deals

The joint statement welcomed the progress to co-develop and co-produce ground mobility systems. As per the experts, India and the U.S. struck a deal to cooperate on Stryker infantry combat vehicles (ICVs) and M777 howitzers artillery. In order to strengthen India's ground forces, a deal to jointly

³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/us-congress-clears-landmark-india-us-fighter-engine-deal-101693418713191.html>

⁴ Dalip Singh, "At India-US 2+2 ministerial dialogue on Friday, India likely to take up F404 engines supply delay," *The Hindu Business Line*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/at-india-us-22-ministerial-dialogue-on-friday-india-likely-to-take-up-f404-engines-supply-delay/article67513428.ece>; <https://idrw.org/india-may-be-looking-at-120-f404-ge-in20-more-engines-for-indias-lca-tejas-mk1a/>

⁵ "Delays in GE Aerospace F404-GE-IN20 Engine Delivery Likely to Impact India's Tejas Mk1A Fighter Jet Program," *Indian Defence Research Wing*, November 9, 2023, <https://idrw.org/delays-in-ge-aerospace-f404-ge-in20-engine-delivery-likely-to-impact-indias-tejas-mk1a-fighter-jet-program/>

⁶ "Delays in GE Aerospace F404-GE-IN20 Engine Delivery Likely to Impact India's Tejas Mk1A Fighter Jet Program," *Indian Defence Research Wing*. <https://idrw.org/delays-in-ge-aerospace-f404-ge-in20-engine-delivery-likely-to-impact-indias-tejas-mk1a-fighter-jet-program/>

produce Stryker, infantry combat vehicles (ICVs), was announced after the 2+2 Dialogue.⁷ Stryker is an 8x8 wheeled armoured vehicle, which includes multiple variants for the purpose of carrying personnel and/or armour.⁸ The ICVs will provide protected mobility for nine infantry personnel of the Indian Army along India's borders with its neighbours China and Pakistan. Such equipment will also provide protection to the Indian patrol officers along with the options of kinetic engagement with machine guns at the Line of Actual Control (LoAC) and Line of Control (LoC) with China and Pakistan, respectively. Another critical deal between Washington and New Delhi was the offer to upgrade the M777 howitzers. The M777 howitzers, products of BAE Systems UK, supported combat troops for offensive and defensive attacks with conventional and precision-guided projectiles.⁹ These were used by the U.S. troops in Afghanistan and are deployed against Russians in Ukraine.¹⁰ India has 145 M777 out of which 120 are manufactured by Mahindra Defence Systems in a business arrangement with BAE systems.¹¹ BAE Systems managing director Ravi Nirgudkar believed that an upgrade of M777 across the whole fleet would not make sense; he rather advocated for an enhanced version of M777 since it would provide an extended range as compared to the existing M777.¹² These systems can be carried by helicopter to the bordering areas of Pakistan and China in case of any emergency in Jammu and Kashmir or Arunachal Pradesh.¹³ M777 will provide the Indian troops with tactical accuracy due to a higher level of digital connectivity across the battlespace.¹⁴

⁷ Ryo Nakamura and Kiran Sharma, "U.S. and India strike deal to co-produce Stryker armored vehicle," *Nikkei Asia*, November 10, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/U.S.-and-India-strike-deal-to-co-produce-Stryker-armored-vehicle>

⁸ Kapil Kajal, "US, India explore joint development of land systems," *Janes*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.janes.com/amp/us-india-explore-joint-development-of-land-systems/ZnIJK3dHVU9mZ28xajRJVkc5dVI5VFp1cVMwPQ2>

⁹ David Vergun, "Howitzers Proving Very Effective Against Russians, DOD Official Says," *U.S. Department of Defense*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.army.gov.au/equipment/artillery/m777-155mm-lightweight-towed-howitzer>

¹⁰ David Vergun, "Howitzers Proving Very Effective Against Russians, DOD Official Says," <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3032926/howitzers-proving-very-effective-against-russians-dod-official-says/>

¹¹ "India-US deal on Stryker armoured vehicles and M777 towed howitzers soon? What are they," *CNBC*, June 23, 2023, <https://www.cnbctv18.com/world/pm-narendra-modi-india-us-deal-stryker-armoured-vehicles-m777-towed-howitzers-explained-17009381.htm/amp>

¹² Kapil Kajal, "India, US explore development of enhanced M777 howitzers," *Janes*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/india-us-explore-development-of-enhanced-m777-howitzers>

¹³ "India-US deal on Stryker armoured vehicles and M777 towed howitzers soon? What are they," *CNBC*, <https://www.cnbctv18.com/world/pm-narendra-modi-india-us-deal-stryker-armoured-vehicles-m777-towed-howitzers-explained-17009381.htm/amp>

¹⁴ "Ukraine has an array of new Western weapons. What advantages could they offer in a counteroffensive?," *Associate Press*, June 30, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-western-weapons-counteroffensive-fd1d44d90e5f0ad6d1a37034753c6dfb>

Global Matters

Russia-Ukraine Conflict

The Ministers had a discussion over the Russia-Ukraine conflict; however, the joint statement reflected an Indian perspective on the subject, which was focused on food security and its impact on the global economic system with special consequences on the 'Global South.' Experts view India as stuck in an evolving world 'disorder' and argue that India, in this global milieu, wishes to befriend both Washington and Moscow, but the conflict in Ukraine, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and G20 presidency have highlighted stark contradictions in the global vision of the U.S. and India.¹⁵

Israel-Hamas Conflict, and Economic Corridor

The developments in the Middle East were also a subject of discussion at the Dialogue. Both the U.S. and India view the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas through the prism of terrorism and support Israel's war against it. The joint statement called for adherence to international humanitarian law, the release of all remaining hostages, and supported a humanitarian pause. The Dialogue only focused on coordination with partners in the region on humanitarian assistance to meet the urgent needs of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. Until this conflict, India maintained its principled position that supported Palestinians and often voted against Israel; however, as soon as this conflict erupted, the Indian Prime Minister categorically supported Israel.¹⁶ Experts argued this as India's strategic tilt towards Israel.¹⁷ Though India portrays itself as a bridge between the West and the 'Global South' and a neutral party, India's stance on the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has shown a dubious face of this flawed narrative. The Ministers showed concern regarding the spread of the conflict through the Middle East and urged that it must be curtailed. Both the U.S. and India wish to connect India with Europe through a Middle East corridor called the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC); however, without peace in the region, such plans could formidable challenges.

'Indo-Pacific' and QUAD

The Ministers reiterated their commitment to a free, open and inclusive 'Indo-Pacific' through mechanisms like the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the U.S., India, Australia and

¹⁵ Emily Tamkin, "India Is Stuck in a New World Disorder," *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/01/india-g7-un-ukraine-russia-war-global-south/>

¹⁶ Maheen Shafeeq, "India Ditches Its 'Neutrality'?", *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, October 31, 2023 <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-ditches-its-neutrality/>

¹⁷ Daniel Markey, India-Israel Ties Reach New Milestone, USIP <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/amid-war-middle-east-india-israel-ties-reach-new-milestone>

Japan), Logistics and Exchange Memorandum Agreement (LEMOA signed between the U.S. and India in 2016), and Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). India is set to host the next QAUD Leaders' Summit in 2024. Many in India are stating that if President Biden accepts the invite to the Republic Day Parade (26 January) India might invite the rest of the QUAD leaders too. Both the U.S. and India discussed shared benefits and efforts for reciprocal steps to enhance the reach of respective militaries under LEMOA. A satisfactory pace of cooperation over the Maritime Domain Awareness was aired and a discussion over the way forward to promote service-to-service ties and share of undersea technology to address the security challenges in the 'Indo-Pacific' was also part of the Dialogue. India is on the path to naval force modernization and according to Indian Navy, it is expected to have 170-180 ships and submarines by 2028.¹⁸ Increasing investments in India's potential as a repair and maintenance pitstop for mid-voyage naval vessels was also part of the discussions. The synergy between the maritime forces of the two countries is obvious from their effort to enhance interoperability not only in technological terms but also in terms of effort to set up new liaison positions to facilitate seamless communication and cooperation.

The increasingly intimidating force posturing in the 'Indo-Pacific' is to wean off threats from China in this region. Though it was not mentioned directly in the joint statement, the Indian Defence Minister made an explicit mention of countering China's aggression in his statement at the Dialogue.¹⁹ While on one hand, the U.S. is providing its full support to position India as a 'bulwark' against China, on the other hand, the U.S. is making efforts to develop a somewhat smooth trajectory of relations with China through dialogues such as the resumption of military-to-military communication, talks on arms control and disarmament and economic forums. Though the joint statement did not refer to the India-Canada diplomatic row, it did mention the resolve to promote and respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, which were the exact demands of Canadian Prime Minister Justine Trudeau.²⁰ However, the Indian side seems to interpret this from the perspective of Sino-India border disputes.

South Asia

The joint statement briefly mentioned Afghanistan and urged it to fulfil its obligation under UNSC resolution 2593 (2021) which demanded Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country. The Ministers unequivocally condemned terrorism and the use of terrorist proxies,

¹⁸ Dinakar Peri, "Quad's IPMDA a proof of our commitment to a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific: Navy Chief," *The Hindu*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/quads-ipmda-a-proof-of-our-commitment-to-a-free-open-inclusive-indo-pacific-navy-chief/article67500745.ece>

¹⁹ ANI News, "Countering China's aggression..." Rajnath Singh talks tough during a bilateral meet with Lloyd Austin," *YouTube*, November 11, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1V6qsfIZC8>

²⁰ Maheen Shafeeq, "India-Canada Diplomatic Row," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, September 26, 2023, https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-canada-diplomatic-row/#_ftn3

logistical, financial or military support to terrorist organizations to launch or plan terrorist attacks. The joint statement specifically mentioned international attacks. It called for concerted action against Al-Qa'eda, ISIS/Daesh, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM) and also emphasized the importance of combatting terror financing in consistence with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations. Though the use of the internet for terrorist purposes has been mentioned in previous joint statements, the use of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) was mentioned for the first time and was quoted as an emerging form of terrorism. It is also the first time that the statement made no explicit mention of Pakistan, which was a constant element of such joint statements since 2018. This may seem to indicate an adjustment in New Delhi and Washington's approach, especially given that Pakistan has been making strong démarches at such unwarranted and unacceptable references in earlier U.S.-India statements. The joint statement mentions South Asia through the lens of terrorism or terror financing, which shows that the two countries are viewing the entire region from a myopic and rather limited perspective. Though there is a mention of bilateral efforts by the U.S. and India to counterterrorism, there is no proposal or initiative for a regional effort to counter this menace. Pakistan has always welcomed cooperative efforts to counterterrorism. But India has never gone beyond hurling unfounded allegations. Without a concentrated effort, the bogey of terrorism will continue to haunt the entire region.

Upcoming Announcements

The fifth India-U.S. 2+2 Dialogue, like previous Dialogues, also mentioned the upcoming events of the next year. It mentioned around ten such events, working group meetings, dialogues, summit, policy forums and so on in the realm of countering terrorism, science and technology, global issues, space, and trade. The events expected in 2024 mentioned in the joint statement are listed below:

1. 20th Meeting of the U.S.-India Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism
2. 5th Designations Dialogue
3. Homeland Security Dialogue 2024
4. Second U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), New Delhi 2024
5. Joint Committee Meeting on Science and Technology, 2024
6. QUAD Leaders' Summit, New Delhi, 2024
7. U.S.-India Global Issues Forum in New Delhi, early 2024.
8. U.S.-India Civil Space Joint Working Group 2024

9. U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum (TPF) 2024

10. Commercial Dialogue 2024

Conclusion

The fifth 2+2 dialogue comes as a testament of further deepening ties between Washington and New Delhi. Since 2018, the two have expanded the horizon of their engagement in all domains. The two sides applauded their previous cooperation and showed keen interest in expanding mutual collaboration in defence and commercial sectors, emerging technologies, space, and global issues in the Middle East, 'Indo-Pacific,' South Asia and Europe. This shows the rigorous efforts by the U.S. in courting India, despite stark differences in their approach towards global issues. Under the shadow of the India-Russia S400 deal going forward, India is efficiently bagging military equipment from Washington. While Washington is strengthening India's potential to counter China, it is also attempting to open channels of communication and cooperation with China and making progress in efforts for disarmament. Though defence assets would boost India's strategic confidence, it remains unclear if they will allow India any tactical advantage over China or Pakistan. While the U.S. and India are fortifying their bilateral relations, they are also conscious of the rapidly changing global geopolitical environment and seem to indicate a nimbler approach.