India-U.S. 2+2 talks - Challenges Ahead

What is the issue?

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- The first round of the India-U.S. 2+2 talks is to be held soon in Delhi.
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- Overcoming the challenges in bilateral ties needs a creative thinking in the 2+2 dialogue.
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How significant is the dialogue?

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- The 2+2 talks is a meet at the level of External Affairs and Defence Ministers of India and their U.S. counterparts.
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- It is a significant development in the two-decade-old trend line of India-U.S. relations.
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- The trend line of the relations has not been all smooth.
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- However, there is a growing strategic engagement between the countries.
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Why is the strategic convergence?

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- Three factors have primarily contributed to the emerging strategic convergence.
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- The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity to both countries to review their relationship.
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- The changing global and regional realities demanded new partnerships and strategies.
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- Als0, the opening of the Indian economy offered scope for an enhanced relationship.
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- The American private sector began to look at India with greater interest.
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- Eventually, trade grew and now stands at more than $120 billion a year.
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- It is moving towards an ambitious target of touching $500 billion in five years.
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- There are foreign direct investments from both sides, reflecting a sustained mutual interest.
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- The third factor is the political coming of age of the three-million-strong Indian diaspora.
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- The Indian diaspora is making a strong presence and influence in the political and other platforms of the U.S.
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What are the irritants?

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- The U.S. is used to dealing with allies and adversaries.
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- The allies have invariably been junior partners in a U.S.-dominated alliance structure.
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- India is neither an ally nor an adversary, and is determined to safeguard its strategic autonomy.
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- So Indians become wary of the U.S.’s attempts to drive unequal bargains.
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- On the other hand, Americans find the Indian approach rigid and superior.
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- So developing the culture of talking to each other as equal partners is a challenge.
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How has the defence cooperation evolved?

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- The strategic dialogue on nuclear issues shifted gears following 1998 nuclear tests by India and U.S.'s imposition of sanctions.
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- The various rounds of talks during 1998-2000 were the most intense dialogue between the two countries.
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- It helped change perceptions leading to the gradual lifting of sanctions.
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- Later, India-U.S. bilateral civil nuclear cooperation agreement was concluded in 2008.
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- The defence dialogue began in 1995 with the setting up of the Defence Policy Group.
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- This was to develop exchanges between the defence services of the two countries.
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- A decade later, this was formalised and enlarged into the India-U.S. Defence Framework Agreement.
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- The agreement was renewed for 10 years in 2015.
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- Today, the U.S. is the country with which India undertakes the largest number of military exercises.
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- During the Cold War, more than three-fourths of India’s defence equipment was of Soviet origin.
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- This has gradually begun to change in recent years, with U.S. and Israel emerging as major suppliers.
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- The recent periods saw an emphasis on technology sharing and joint development.
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- This has led to the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTII).
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- Many pathfinder projects have been identified under this banner.
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- Efforts at relaxing the export control licensing and other bureaucratic hurdles were taken.

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- In 2016, India was designated as a ‘Major Defence Partner’ country.
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- Another step forward is the inclusion of India in the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1) category.
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- This should enable the DTII to graduate to more ambitious projects.
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What are the obligations?

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- Acquiring U.S. high technology comes with its own set of obligations for ensuring its security.
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- These take the form of various undertakings often described as foundational agreements.
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- The first of these was GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) which India signed in 2002.
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- The other three related to
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i. logistics support
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ii. communications compatibility and security
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iii. exchanges of geospatial information
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- The U.S. proposed its standard logistics support agreement text in 2003.
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- It was finally concluded in 2016, and was made into an India-specific text.
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- It facilitates logistics supplies during port visits and joint exercises.
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- Now, the India-specific Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) is likely to be signed.

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- It makes it possible to install high-end secure communication equipment on U.S. platforms that India has been acquiring.
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- With the possibility of acquiring armed Sea Guardian drones, COMCASA was necessary to ensure optimal use.
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- The lessons learnt should help in expediting negotiations on the third (exchanges of geospatial information).
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What lies ahead?

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- There are certain issues to be addressed and the 2+2 talks offer an opportunity for this.
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- **CAATSA** - Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) was enacted last year.
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- It enables the U.S. government to sanction countries engaging in 'significant transactions' with Russian military and intelligence entities.
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- The proposed purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia would attract CAATSA sanctions.
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- A waiver provision to this has now been introduced to cover India, Indonesia and Vietnam.
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- But it requires certification by the U.S. that the country concerned is gradually reducing its dependency on Russian equipment and cooperating with the U.S. on critical security issues.
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- The Indian concerns in regards with this need to be addressed.
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- **Chabahar** - Iranian crude imports have grown significantly in recent years.
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- India also stepped up its involvement in developing the Chabahar port.
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- The port provides connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia.
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- But the U.S. imposition of sanctions on Iran after its unilateral withdrawal

from the nuclear deal poses hurdles.
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- Given these, a creative thinking will be needed in the 2+2 dialogue to overcome the challenges.
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- Both countries will have to nurture the habit of talking and working together.
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- This is essential to realise the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (2015).
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Source: The Hindu

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