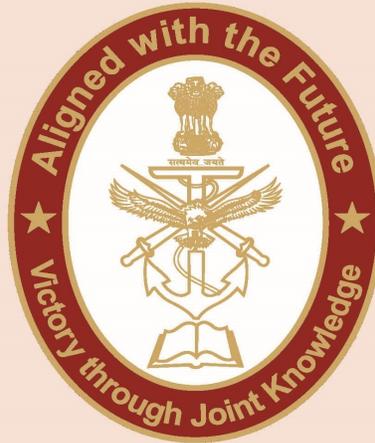


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TWO PLUS TWO: EQUAL TO TWENTY TWO, OR MAY BE FOUR

BY

LT GEN RAMESHWAR YADAV, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (RETD)

If you ask students in any of the higher educational institutes in India, as to what is their aspiration, a large percentage would express their desire to go to US for higher studies and probably work there. The business fraternity looks towards the business policies, trends, innovations, technology, trade relations, stock market and above all the exchange rate of dollar each day. There is no multinational conducting business in India who do not have American linkages in some form or other. The BPOs and IT hubs in India are churning out all kinds of services for US companies and socio-economic milieu. The think tanks hyphenate their strategic outreach and options of state craft taking US perspective as an important input on the global issues. The interior economy is also enmeshed to the geo-politics of oil and gas which in turn is controlled from the shores of America.

Therefore, the US while located on other side to the globe has impressionable influence on socio- politics and almost all economic activities in our country. There are 70 odd countries where US has military bases with capabilities of power projection any time any where across the world. Besides this, the US dollar is the currency of international trade acting as a hub and a reference point for the global economic net work. **The fact of the matter is that shine, shadow and silhouette of US is seen in not only in India, but also most of the nation states, and even in the complex and complicit world of non state actors.**

With such an engaging enormity and all pervasive influence of the US, the upcoming 2+2 dialogue scheduled on 06 Sep 2018 has undeniably an intrinsic value for India and import of its politico-military afflictions on nations on our periphery with inimical designs. **The integrated construct of foreign and defence dialogue as a composite whole is indicative of US objective of bringing about a paradigm shift, or adjustments in the Indo-US partnership with an objective of taking it to the next level .**

The uniqueness of this relationship is that it has withstood test of time as it has been nurtured by the polity in both the nations irrespective of political dispensation in both the countries. Hence, it is indicative of common values and demonstrative positive political synergies between the largest and the oldest democracies of the world with potential of shaping the global landscape in the contemporary times.

Neutralization of Taliban in Afghanistan and containing Chinese rise in Indo-Pacific appear to be the two immediate concerns of the US in her political lexicon wherein India is seen as the bridge head as both countries have mutuality of interests here. Denuclearization of Iran & South Korea and regime change in Syria are other burning concerns wherein the US has accorded priority in her strategic matrix. The US objective of perpetuating her stature as the only super power, or alternately have decisive dominance in a multi polar world, if it so happens, would continue to be an important denominator as a backdrop to their narrative. The discussion on these issues may also be on the table as it has significant import on strategic panorama in the South Asian region.

Taking the Afghanistan first, the fifteen years plus US campaign to bridle the Taliban and other inimical forces appears to have reached a decisive stage. Earlier Obama administration had plans of gradual US draw down from the Asian landscape which has been put on hold by the new President Trump as of now. The apparent thought process seems to deny any further the strategic space to Russia on Eastern flank of Middle East. It has to be hyphenated with their September 2015 military intervention in Syria thereby establishing Russia as a reference point on the western flank of the region, besides their political intimacy with Iran and influence over Central Asian Republics (CAR). Apropos, Trump would probably like to move out after achieving US objectives of establishing a stable government in Kabul which in turn is expected to do their bidding in future taking care of their strategic turf.

The complicity of Pakistan in nurturing Taliban to perpetuate insurgency in Afghanistan is well established and is a matter of concern for the US. Pakistan on one hand has been supporting Taliban and Haqqani net work, and on other hand they have been leveraging the prevailing situation created by them to extract liberal economic and military aid from the US. The present administration in the US has seen through the Pakistani bluff exposing their deceit and duplicity in Afghanistan. The Trump has categorically stated his unhappiness over Pakistani conduct all these years and expects them to show results on ground by controlling and facilitating dialogue with the taliban. The reported stop over of secretary of state on 05 Sep 2018 one day prior to his visit to New Delhi probably would be to engage Pakistan on such issues.

The US is looking at India to play a leading role in reconstruction of infrastructure and help in bringing about political stability in post reconciliation phase, which they are hoping would materialize soon. To do that, India does not have direct access to Afghanistan as Pakistan has been denying transit facilities to her due to political reasons. India on their part have assisted Iran in developing Chabahar port as an alternate route to Afghanistan and CAR. This route is also connected to North –South corridor connecting the land locked Eurasian countries. Hence, it has potential of even serving US interests as an alternate route for their logistics to Afghanistan, should Pakistan does not play up.

The US has imposed sanctions on Iran with a proviso that if any country indulges in economic dealings with Iran would also face similar sanctions.

Whereas, the Iran is the second largest supplier of oil to India and if this energy supply is denied, it would have severe impact on Indian economy. Accordingly, India may seek waiver to US sanctions to help them in their Afghanistan engagement in the ensuing talks. In that, if India continues to be constructively engaged with Iran through economic ties in their trying times, it would have leverages with Iran for reproachment with the US, if so required later. Therefore, it has an indirect opportunity content both for India as well as the US.

The major thrust of the dialogue is likely to be focused on the role US expects India to play in containing the rise of China in the Indo- Pacific as their partner. The Chinese occupation of Spratly and Paracel islands and other small reefs covering large areas in South China Sea(SCS) without even firing a bullet, and ever increasing military bases in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has send clear signals of Chinese intentions of dominating the sea lanes for her trade and commerce.

It is estimated that \$ 5 trillion trade is conducted through the SCS and has reserves of 17.7 billion ton of crude oil. **The US is insisting that the SCS should continue to be treated as international waters and all countries should have freedom of navigation in the region.** India is in consonance with the US point of view in this regards .India has even gone to the extent of joining hands with the Vietnam in conducting oil exploration in their EEZ which as per China is a disputed area. Therefore, the US and India are on the same page as regards to world opinion on the status of SCS.

To compliment their coercive political outreach in SCS, the China has also built in redundancy for their energy security by embarking on CPEC scheme as part of their BRI concept connecting Chinese main land to Gwadar port of Pakistan. India happens to be geographically dominant country in South Asia and IOR wherein Chinese BRI net work has been planned both over land and sea. Hence, it speaks of apparent centrality of India as “pivot of East” in the US strategic calculus and their desire to utilize Indian geographical space for their geo –political objectives in the region.

The US, probably, would like to give a shape to this conceptual idea, suggesting India to take steps toward joining their band wagon something on lines of their NATO allies. The format may well be undeclared and unofficial in its

content, while extending certain privileges open to only the allies. On the face of it, India has opportunities to enhance her strategic turf, but it has its own political costs. The Indian political strength has been proven time and again by adhering to the policy of non alignment as it provides strategic flexibility to have good relations. Accordingly, India is likely to exercise her options, albeit within confines Non Aligned political cardinals.

The dialogue may also include enhancement of the Indian military capabilities for power projection as a matter of mutual interest. The US would like to impress on India to purchase weapon platforms and reorientation of Indian military structures for interoperability with US and their allies. In that, the US would like to sell their defence products in all the possible fields to replace Russia as the major supplier of the arms and equipment to India.

whereas, India is looking towards building up her own capabilities and structures in defence production field which requires developing and acquiring state of art technologies. The US, as a pattern, has been somewhat reluctant for transfer of technology which happens to be a basic tenet of "Make in India" scheme of the government.

The visiting members of US think tanks have also been advocating concept of "Assemble in India" as against "Make in India" on the argument that Indian industry is not mature enough to absorb the cutting edge technologies. It is obvious that US is keen to create a captive market for US products which India desperately needs, but they are apparently not enthusiastic to part with the niche technologies as it would impact on their own businesses and employment.

India needs to follow a balanced approach in this regards as US equipment is certainly have high quality content and we already have line of weapon platforms of US origin which needs to be sustained and expanded. Both the countries need to meet at a half way mark to begin the long term relationship in defence production.

The US probably would also like to take the concept of QUAD and their bilateral military equation to next level with proviso of assistance in case of any confrontation in the Indo- Pacific. In that, Indian armed forces do not have such power projection capabilities as their mandate is restricted to safe guarding the

territorial integrity. The overseas capabilities are limited to IOR as out of area contingencies for humanitarian aid and low level military engagements in neighbourhood in their distress situations.

Therefore, conceptually India is unlikely to join any armed confrontation with an outside force unless India itself is a target of the inimical military moves. What India can do, and that too under certain conditions, is to provide logistics and communication support to the US from our ground establishments without decisively engaged and seen in an armed confrontation, if it so happens.

Pakistan sponsored terrorism and her complicity in perpetuating insurgency in the J&K is likely to be a major issue of discussion. The Pakistan has been leveraging the Indian threat on her Eastern borders, albeit created by themselves by initiating well calibrated fire assaults on the Line of Control (LC) to seek aid from the US. Interestingly, this orchestrated threat happens to be an excuse for not providing adequate forces for the US Afghanistan campaign, the very reason for the aid

This Pakistani narrative has to be stopped in order to bring about peace in the Af-Pak region which happens to be the essential factor for stabilizing Afghanistan. **Therefore, it would be in the US interests to use their politico-economic leverages to pressurize the new political dispensation in Pakistan to stop the terrorist activities against India.** There are unlikely to be any dramatic changes in Pakistani (army) narrative as **anti India rhetoric is a compulsion beyond compromise for them.** However, Pakistan with her crippled economy and urgent need of a financial bailout may be willing to lower the ante and mend their ways, as of now.

The scope and scale of dialogue is quite large when seen in the commonality of interests in international issues, bilateral trade, defence, education, science and technology, Indian Diaspora, socio-cultural milieu etc etc. In strategic parlance, India **should** guard against any suggestion to dilute her non aligned status and **continue to be non aligned by aligning with everyone**, thereby have political flexibility to reach out to all on matters of mutual interests. Looking at current political synergies, there may be a way forward with the US in most of the areas of mutual interests, albeit without any incumbencies which may impact on our national security and sovereignty.

While engaging with the US, one has to keep in mind that Indian interest lies in good harmonious relations with our neighbours through creating an environment for cooperation instead of confrontation in the region. **The US has far reaching military capabilities, political influence and technological prowess in facilitating a world order with free flow of trade and reduced level of cognitive conflicts.** India, despite perceptual differentials with US in few areas, has an opportunity to support US in perpetuating such positive synergies. While doing that, a balance has to be maintained not to cross the Rubicon line beyond which our national interests are impacted.

Given the best of equations between India and US as on date, the gains expected in this diplomatic outreach would surely be high in tangible as well as intangible strategic domain. **Let the ensuing two plus two dialogue show up the sum as twenty two instead of numerical four as the end state of the confabulations.** A new horizon is beckoning India and US for a mutually benefitting era of partnership. It is a new initiative which needs to be given a pragmatic look with utmost sincerity.

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