



Bilateral Counterterrorism Cooperation on the Agenda for the 2+2 US-India Dialogue

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As Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mattis land in New Delhi over the next few hours to kick off the inaugural 2+2 dialogue with their Indian counterparts, news reports and official statements from the two sides have focused on the key strategic objective of the meetings, namely to enhance bilateral defense cooperation as the key driver of the security relationship between the two countries. While steady and even meteoric growth in the US defense sales to India and investment in India is undoubtedly of great strategic importance to both countries, very often the other issue of paramount concern that the two countries need to include in the 2+2 is the pressing need to further US-India Counterterrorism Cooperation.

Secretary Pompeo will stop over in Islamabad en route to New Delhi to discuss Pakistani cooperation or the lack of it in solving the imbroglio in Afghanistan. It is natural that the situation in Afghanistan and the need to resolve it without much further loss of precious American blood or treasure will feature somewhat prominently in the 2+2 dialogue; it is moot however to what extent bilateral counterterrorism cooperation will form a part of the discussion.

Preceding the visit of Secretaries Pompeo and Mattis, the bilateral homeland security dialogue between the two countries came out with a draft plan to channelize cooperation in a few selected areas. It is interesting to note the timing of the dialogue. Why was this dialogue held just days before the 2+2? Why was it not a part of the 2+2?

Given the importance of bilateral US-India counterterrorism cooperation it is only natural that the homeland security dialogue between the two countries be part of the 2+2. Also, it is only logical that this should form part of a potential 3+3 where the Homeland Security secretary levels officials from both sides also participate. A strategic blueprint to address common



counterterrorism challenges and strategies in the Indian subcontinent and South Asia could then be formulated.

Official sources are lauding the intended discussion as part of the 2+2 dialogue of the forever proposed listing Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar and his accomplices by the UN Al-Qaida Sanctions Regime as a sign of increased US-India counterterrorism cooperation. Given China's intransigent stand spanning several years against such listings that ruffle ally Pakistan's feathers, it is debatable as to whether such efforts will bear fruit. Also, UN listings per se have not resulted in abatement or cessation of the activities, funding, and the overall actions of the India-centric terrorist groups. UN listed entities like Lashkar—Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, or the Taliban are still quite robust and attacking US, Indian, and Afghan civilians, targets, and personnel at their will and fancy.

Even if tactical discussions regarding terrorist designations need to take place, these need to be left to officials at the sub-cabinet level. A strategic map to weed out terrorism in India and South Asia and against American interests in these regions and beyond should form of the 2+2 Secretaries level dialogue. Only then can a composite security and strategic dialogue encompassing bilateral defense and counterterrorism cooperation fructify.