

Pompeo, Esper to push anti-China message in India

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Body

WASHINGTON - Just a week before November's election, two of President Donald Trump's top national security aides will visit India for meetings focused largely on countering China's growing global influence. As the bitter race between Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden winds down, the talks this week in New Delhi aim to reinforce the president's anti-China campaign message.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper will meet their Indian counterparts for strategic and security talks on Tuesday, after which Pompeo will travel to Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Indonesia. All of them are contending with a tug-of-war between Washington and Beijing that has intensified as Trump seeks to paint Biden as weak on China.

Trump has played up his friendship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his re-election bid but may have set his case back with an off-the-cuff remark about climate change at his Thursday debate with Biden. "Look at China, how filthy it is. Look at Russia. Look at India, it's filthy. The air is filthy," he said, defending his decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord.

Whether offense will be taken by the Indians or whether it will affect Pompeo and Esper's mission is not clear. Yet, regardless of election considerations, it is a critical time in the U.S.-India relationship as China looms large over what Washington has labeled the Indo-Pacific region.

Heightened border tensions between New Delhi and Beijing have only added to Chinese-American animosity that has been fueled by disputes over the coronavirus, trade, technology, Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, human rights and disputes between China and its smaller neighbors in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, India is looking to emerge from a shell of internal issues, including unrest in the Himalayan region of Kashmir, as it faces twin threats from China and Pakistan.

Pompeo has made no secret of the Trump administration's desire to isolate China. "I'm sure that my meetings will also include discussions on how free nations can work together to thwart threats posed by the Chinese Communist Party," he said.

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