Thorny trade, defense issues await US diplomats in India

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WASHINGTON - Two of US President Donald Trump's top officials are finally heading for talks in India this week, after Washington twice pulled the plug on the meeting.  
The so-called 2+2 dialogue will see US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis meet with their Indian counterparts on a range of key defense and trade issues.  
Both sides are likely to herald Thursday's talks－the first of their kind between the two nations－as proof positive of their rapidly growing strategic partnership in the region.  
The diplomats must smooth a slew of problems exacerbated by Trump's relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.  
The talks were first meant to be held in April and then in June but both were postponed, triggering speculation of a possible rift amid disputes over trade.  
Putting aside the interpersonal dynamics of their two leaders, the officials must tackle two urgent issues－the United States' demands for India to stop buying Iranian oil, and for it to think twice about making new Russian arms purchases.  
In 2016, Washington designated India a "Major Defense Partner", capping years of efforts to improve India-US ties under president Barack Obama. The aim was to improve military cooperation and cut red tape to ease defense deals.  
The US wants India to distance itself from Russia, notably by stepping back from decades of purchases of Russian military equipment.  
But India, the world's top defense importer, wants to purchase new systems from Moscow, including its S-400 surface-to-air missile system.  
Under current US rules against Russia, third countries could face sanctions if they transact with Russian defense or intelligence sectors.  
The Press Trust of India recently reported that the deal was almost done, and New Delhi would be asking for a special sanctions waiver from Washington.  
However, Randall Schriver, the Pentagon's assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, warned last week that there are no guarantees.  
"We would still have very significant concerns if India pursued major new platforms and systems (from Russia). I can't sit here and tell you that they would be exempt, that we would use that waiver," he said, adding that the US is open to helping India find an alternative for the S-400.  
India already has bought US Apache attack helicopters and other equipment, and is negotiating to buy armed drones.  
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