

Christmas gift: US declares India a major defence partner

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Call it a Christmas present or a parting gift. The outgoing US Congress has formalised the growing defence partnership with India, following the Obama administration's decision to declare India a major defence partner. Section 1292 of the 2017 National Defence Authorisation Act titled 'Enhancing defence and security cooperation with India' is a significant building block, a good incremental step, and a pointer in the right direction. It advances the ball.

But if you want to quibble, the language passed by the House and Senate earlier this month is somewhat constrained. It reflects the deep compromises forced by some members — or rather their staff aides — who want more from India before opening the final doors to dual-use technology. The original idea was to get India on the exclusive list that includes Nato allies, Japan, Israel, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand by amending the Arms Control Act — a huge undertaking. Clearly, Congressional sentiment didn't match the ambition of Indian-Americans pushing for such far-reaching changes.

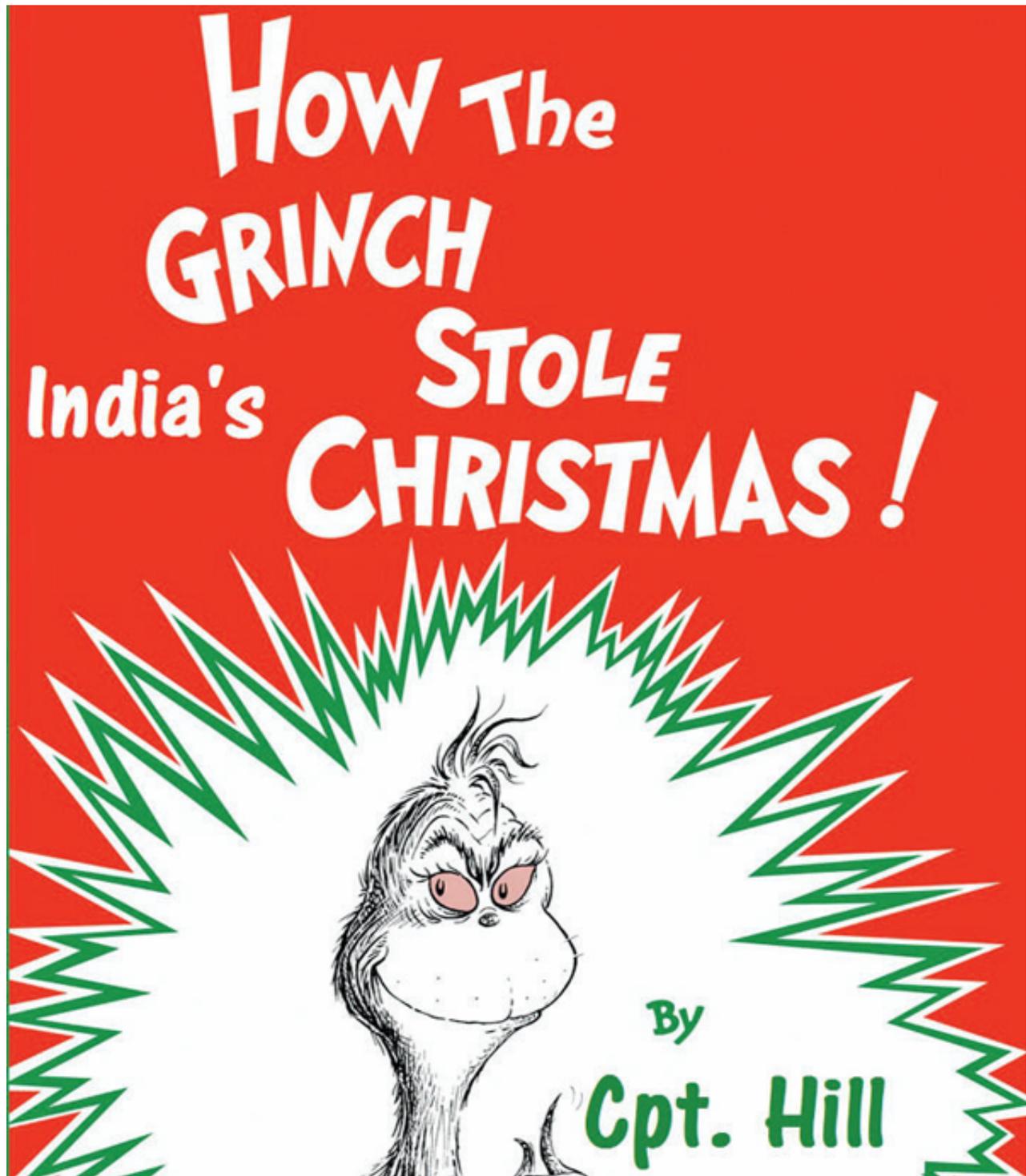
Was it because some key members continue to have mixed feelings about India? Irritation with the slow pace of signing 'foundational agreements' has grown even though India finally signed a logistics agreement this year. Then there are particular senators who are upset with the treatment of Christian NGOs by the Modi government.

The input of the State Department's political-military bureau was also unhelpful. It doesn't want to go too far too fast without getting more in

return. The list of American grievances is long: trade, intellectual property rights (IPR), missing fruits of the nuclear deal, and India's general reluctance to get too close to the US.

Be that as it may, codification into law of what already exists, most importantly the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative, will at least prevent reversal of gains. It protects them from whims of petty bureaucrats and volatile presidents. The written word matters in the end.

Congratulations are due to members of the US-India Security Council (USISC), a bipartisan group that worked hard behind the scenes, spent real money, hired lobbyists to help open Washington doors and came up with the language.



But some senators remain sceptical

USISC board members also met top Indian officials, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, over the past year and apparently got “their input and tacit approval”. On Capitol Hill, they focused on key senators, particularly Senator

John McCain, a power centre without whom anything defence-related is hard to move.

But as is typical with things Indian, another group also boldly but wrongly claimed credit in front of the Indian ambassador for conceiving, drafting and advocating for the legislation. In time, this law will likely spawn many more Indian-American fathers.

Interestingly, the formalisation of India's status as a major US defence partner came in the middle of a severe outbreak of Russian fever in Washington. The American establishment is outraged that Vladimir Putin interfered in the elections to help Donald Trump. It's as if the very idea of America is at risk and the president-elect is complicit in the subversion.

While the establishment fumes, the Congress has done its bit to bind the next president and his successors to maintaining a certain high level of defence cooperation with India. It directs both the secretaries of defence and of state to take steps to give more teeth to the defence partnership via technology transfer, better coordination within the US bureaucracy and efficient review and authorisation of sales and exports.

The designation means more when you think of the next administration's high unpredictability factor. It may cut a deal with Russia or China or both, raising the stakes for India. But then, it may not. No one knows how Trump's nominee for secretary of defence, retired General James 'Mad Dog' Mattis, would view the Indo-Pacific and South Asia in particular.

What we do know is that Mattis as the head of US Central Command from 2010-13 rescued Pakistan from the abyss not once, not twice but three times, defending the Pakistani army in front of the Senate, rationalising its behaviour and arguing for continued assistance. But then so did everyone else in Washington.

The Pentagon's position on Pakistan has since 'evolved' and Mattis will hopefully take a wider view of US interests in the region. And this is where the Congress declaring India a major defence partner in law will carry weight. It may even inspire Mattis to take a personal interest in India as Ashton Carter, the current defence secretary, did.

Carter to Mattis is where the real action will be.