



ISSUE BRIEF

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INDIA-US MILITARY AGREEMENT: BECA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION

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The signing of Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) between India and United States marks the completion of the troika of “foundational pacts” for military cooperation between the two countries. BECA was signed on 27th October, 2020 after a decade long negotiation and discussion.

Previously, for enhanced logistic and military cooperation, US and India have signed Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016 and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018. These three agreements now merge into the bigger umbrella of the US-India Global Strategic Partnership.¹ In 2002, US and India also signed General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with similar aims.

LEMOA provided the militaries of both the countries the ability to replenish from each other's bases and to access supplies, and spare parts from each other's land facilities, air bases and ports. It is significant for Indian Navy as the two countries are collaborating in Indo-Pacific. COMCASA provided India with encrypted communication equipment so that the air and naval forces of both the countries could communicate securely during war and peace.²

¹ Highlights of 2020 U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, (2020), October 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/highlights-of-2020-u-s-india-22-ministerial-dialogue/>.

² Shubhajit Roy, "Explained: BECA, and the Importance of 3 Foundational Pacts of India-US Defence Cooperation," *The Indian Express*, November 3, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/becca-india-us-trade-agreements-rajnath-singh-mike-pompeo-6906637/>.

BECA has further advanced this cooperation by providing India real time access to American geo-spatial intelligence which will be beneficial in augmenting the accuracy of automated systems and other weapons including missile armed drones. In addition to being helpful in fighting wars and identifying the location of targets, and flying aircrafts and sailing ships, geo-spatial intelligence can also play a crucial role in responding to natural disasters. By virtue of this agreement, both the countries can also share high-end satellite images and telephonic intercepts. Moreover, since India is trying to establish its own Geographic Information (GI) Policy, the significance of BECA is manifold as it would facilitate India in achieving its national GI Policy goals.

The signing of BECA had been delayed for it was blocked by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government over concerns raised by security forces on the protection of classified information.³ The other main concern revolved around providing US access to classified laboratories in India.⁴ The skeptics argued that such agreements were eroding the strategic autonomy of India. The decade long negotiations aimed at addressing these internal concerns. However, the very fact that the opposition voices from the Indian Parliament are still questioning why such a crucial agreement has not been debated on the floor of the Parliament⁵ before signing, indicate that these negotiations have left a lot to be desired in redressing these issues.

Moreover, since the detailed agreement has not been publicly released, the secrecy of the document itself is sufficient to raise questions as to what extent India has compromised to gain certain information, and also, to what extent US might be willing to share information with the Indian forces in the first place. Even the strategic and defense analysts within India are raising serious concerns about the implications of this agreement. Many argue that BECA has granted US systems entry into Indian military's digitized space.⁶ Moreover, it is also feared that it has placed US in a position where it can not only access, but can also potentially falsify, corrupt or even poison any dataset available on that system.⁷

³ "Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation," *The Economic Times*, October 23, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/basic-exchange-and-cooperation-agreement-for-geo-spatial-cooperation/articleshow/78820683.cms>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dhairya Maheshwari, "Modi Gov't Should Have Debated India-US Geospatial Data Sharing Pact in Parliament, Ex-Minister Says," *Sputnik News*, October 30, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/india/202010301080913357-modi-govt-should-have-debated-india-us-geospatial-data-sharing-pact-in-parliament-ex-minister-says/>.

⁶ Pravin Sawhney, "Why India's Latest Defence Agreement with the United States May Prove a Costly Bargain," *The Wire*, October 27, 2020, <https://thewire.in/security-security/beca-india-usa-comcasa-defence-data-sharing>

⁷ Ibid.

In addition to internal concerns, BECA has geo-political costs for India as well. First, by signing this agreement, India has embarked upon a slippery slope where during the next few years, US can start demanding more facilitation from India. Second, the more India places itself in the US bracket, the further it goes away from other blocs such as ASEAN, SAARC, SCO, BRICS. Third, India has historically bought its weapons from Russia and is expecting more in 2021.⁸ The US has repeatedly expressed concerns over installing a Russian air defense system in the US hardware located in India. They fear it might provide Russia with crucial information about US defense platforms. US has previously warned India that such transactions could attract sanctions,⁹ or at least result in putting a hard ceiling on military cooperation between the two countries.

Furthermore, BECA has been signed against the backdrop of India's standoff with China in Eastern Ladakh. It is pertinent to note that the exchange of data between the two countries also includes the exchange on information of Chinese weapons and troops along the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC).¹⁰ It brings serious concerns for China as this Indian move poses serious threat to regional strategic stability. Instead of resolving the border dispute with China, India's obsession with gaining military benefits over it will only intensify the geopolitical divide in the region which might result in protracted conflicts. By signing this agreement, India has also invited a new security dilemma in the region which could culminate in an arms race further deteriorating the regional stability.

Holistically, BECA should be viewed as a succession of events consolidating the US Indo-Pacific Policy. Related developments to BECA, such as the Quadrilateral Security Group (QSG) with its upcoming military exercises are also a continuation of the same strategy. Furthermore, India also recently conducted mini-lateral dialogues with France and Australia,¹¹ in which France unveiled its Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, such defense agreements are paradoxical to the concept of Indo-Pacific as ASEAN countries are decidedly non-aligned. These developments are a clear manifestation of US-Indian pursuit of balancing off China in the region. For this reason, both US and India have

⁸ "Russian S-400 Missile Delivery to India by End of 2021: Official," *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/5/russian-s-400-missile-delivery-to-india-by-end-of-2021-official>.

⁹ Franz-Stefan Gady, "US Warns India over S-400 Air Defense System Deal with Russia," *The Diplomat*, June 25, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/us-warns-india-over-s-400-air-defense-system-deal-with-russia/>.

¹⁰ "2+2 Dialogue: India, US Sign Crucial Agreement on Geo-spatial Intelligence," *The Indian Express*, October 27, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-us-22-dialogue-beca-pompeo-esper-rajnath-jaishankar-6897216/>.

¹¹ Rajeswari P. Rajagopalan, "Rise of the Minilaterals: Examining the India-France-Australia Trilateral," *The Diplomat*, September 17, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/rise-of-the-minilaterals-examining-the-india-france-australia-trilateral/>.

embarked on the joint venture of altering the strategic landscape of the region and BECA is a step forward in this regard.

Against the panorama of changing geo-political environment of the region, Pakistan has maintained a well-calibrated policy to cater to the growing Sino-US rivalry by retaining constructive relations with both the US and China. However, BECA provides India with military and strategic advantage by granting it access to sensitive information. This places Pakistan and other neighboring countries in a difficult position. However, "Pakistan has been consistently highlighting the threats posed to strategic stability in South Asia as a result of provision of advanced military hardware, technologies and knowledge to India."¹² Since BECA is focused on geo-spatial information, Pakistan's focus should be to reinvigorate Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission's (SUPARCO) capacity, and aggressively pursue its own geo-spatial cooperation with friendly countries in order to retain the strategic balance in the region. In this milieu, the collaboration of China and Pakistan on 2012-2020 Space Cooperation Outline¹³ between SUPARCO and China National Space Administration (CNSA) is a promising way forward.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Release, October 27, 2020, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-release-362/>.

¹³ John Sheldon, "Pakistan Signs Space Cooperation Agreement With C," *SpaceWatch.Global*, May 1, 2019, <https://spacewatch.global/2019/05/pakistan-signs-space-cooperation-agreement-with-china-to-enable-first-pakistani-astronaut/>