



US-INDIA BASIC EXCHANGE COOPERATION AGREEMENT: PROVIDING INDIA A MILITARY EDGE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



United States and India recently conducted the 2+2 Ministerial dialogue on October 26-27, 2020. Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh held the third round of the dialogue with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Defense Secretary Mark Esper. The two-day visit concluded with signing of three agreements, an MoU and a Letter of Intent between the two parties.¹

The talks were aimed to revamp the overall defense and security ties between the two capitals as well as boost strategic ties in the Indo-Pacific cooperation. The first round of the 2+2 Ministerial dialogue was held in Delhi in 2018 followed by a second round in 2019 in Washington. The fourth round of dialogue is planned in Washington in 2021.²

The most significant outcome of the dialogue was signing of the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence, also known as BECA. The BECA agreement follows the four

¹ "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Indian Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh Joint Press Availability at the US India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," Remarks, Office of the Spokesperson, *US State Department*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-secretary-of-defense-mark-esper-indian-minister-of-external-affairs-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-and-indian-minister-of-defense-rajnath-singh-joint-press-availability-at-the/>

² Joint Statement on the Third U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, Office of Spokesperson, *US Department of State*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-third-u-s-india-22-ministerial-dialogue/>

foundational agreements³ that the two parties are signatory to, namely, the General Security of Military Information Agreement – GSOMA, signed in 2002, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement – LEMOA, signed in 2016, and the Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement – COMCASA, signed in 2018.

Indo-US strategic ties have been on a constant rise since 2005 when both countries planned to establish a global partnership under President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, after the completion of the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative in 2004.⁴ It was under the NSSP that Washington and New Delhi laid their first foundational stone to delve into high technology and space, satellite navigation, and defense technology. As a result, in 2016 US designated India as a Major Defense Partner⁵ (MDP) to alleviate its defense and technology relations. It was then that the two countries inked LEMOA which allowed both the capitals to use each other's bases for repair and replenishment as well as military supplies, spare parts, air, land and naval facilities.

Following LEMOA, both countries signed COMCASA in 2018 which allowed them easy interoperability, access to encrypted communication equipment and systems, secure networks, transfer of security equipment as well as provide easy sale and access of high end technology to India in time of crisis. Following the signing of agreements, Washington elevated India's status to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1, a provision that provided India with easy access to a wide range of military and dual use technology license free.⁶ Moreover, the US political military bureau supported the increase of defense trade with India from insignificant numbers to over \$20 billion in 2020 through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS).⁷

BECA is being hailed as a 'significant milestone' between the two countries as it makes the relationship more strong, resilient and growing.⁸ The agreement also comes in a backdrop of three main events; India's standoff with China at Ladakh, its falsely claimed air strike at Balakot and US

³ "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Indian Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh Joint Press Availability at the US India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue."

⁴ Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, White House Press Release, *US Department of State*, Archive, July 18, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/pr/2005/49763.htm>

⁵ "Joint India-United States Statement on the Visit of Secretary of Defense Carter to India," *US Department of Defense*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1024228/joint-india-united-states-statement-on-the-visit-of-secretary-of-defense-carter/>

⁶ US Security Cooperation With India, Bureau of Political Military Affairs, *US Department of State*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joanna Slater, "With eye on China, India and US Sign Accord to Deepen Military Ties," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-us-pompeo-esper-delhi-agreement/2020/10/27/51036064-17c4-11eb-8bda-814ca56e138b_story.html

growing anti China stance. For the US, the agreement comes amid the rising tensions between not just the US and China, but also at the Line of Actual Control between India and China. The deal not only draws the two capitals closer against the rise of China, but also establishes increased chances of India's inclination for another Balakot with the ongoing crisis in Kashmir, as India will be able to access satellite data from the US to verify its hits and targets. Furthermore, both the capitals also hinted of joint cooperation and capacity building as well as activities in third countries in their neighborhood and beyond, as both plan to expand on regional security cooperation⁹ signaling a possible Washington backed Indian involvement in Afghanistan post US withdrawal.

Neither of the two US officials mentioned Pakistan by name and were more circumspect in their remarks. They referred to their partnership as 'force multipliers'¹⁰ against China and its partners. During the 2+2 dialogue, China was targeted by US and India as a mutual cause of concern for both the parties.¹¹

While all the agreements have individual characteristics, they complement each other and provide India with a superior advantage in event of a war. The risks posed by the strategic dance between the US and India are high as the deal opens doors for yet another era of arms race and strategic and security destabilization in not just South Asia, but also in the Indian Ocean, and the Indo-Pacific. The agreement will aid and open new strategic avenues for both India and the US in the realm of satellite imagery, geospatial Intel, accuracy of missiles, navigation, and aeronautical data. It will enable India to access classified information through the US satellites on its Northern and Western border, an advantage that will result in significance situational awareness in need of missile strike or a nuclear attack.¹² In layman terms, the agreement will allow the US to share satellite imagery and information of top secret nature with India that would help New Delhi in its selection of military targets with pin-point accuracy as well as help India in accumulating critical information for military application complimented by highly accurate navigation for swift targeting. This will also provide India with the facility to keep a close watch on its northern and western border with China and Pakistan as well on the Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean.

⁹ "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Indian Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh Joint Press Availability at the US India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," Remarks, Office of the Spokesperson, *US State Department*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-secretary-of-defense-mark-esper-indian-minister-of-external-affairs-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-and-indian-minister-of-defense-rajnath-singh-joint-press-availability-at-the/>

¹⁰ Secretary Micheal R. Pompeo With Rahul Shivshankar of Times Now, Interview, *US State Department*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-micheal-r-pompeo-with-rahul-shivshankar-of-times-now/>

¹¹ Joanna Slater, "With eye on China, India and US Sign Accord to Deepen Military Ties," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-us-pompeo-esper-delhi-agreement/2020/10/27/51036064-17c4-11eb-8bda-814ca56e138b_story.html

¹² Dr. Adil Sultan, "India-US Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)," *Strategic Foresight for Asia*, October 28, 2020, <https://strafasia.com/india-us-basic-exchange-and-cooperation-agreement-beca/>