



US-INDIA ARMED DRONE DEAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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



To boost its sea, land and air defences, India in March 2021 has made plans to buy 30 MQ-9B armed drones worth US\$3 billion from the US.¹ Earlier, in November 2020, the Indian Navy leased two Sea Guardian drones and now three wings of the Indian armed forces have reportedly decided to jointly buy 30 armed versions of the American Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) - MQ-9B Sky Guardian/Sea Guardian.² States like the UK, France, Australia, Germany, Taiwan, Netherlands, Belgium and Italy have MQ-9B drones. The armed drone deal would add as a modern warfare tool to India's existing military capabilities which are aimed at preparing for a "two-front war" against China and Pakistan.

¹ "India to buy 30 US Predator Drones for \$3 bn to Counter China, Pakistan," *Business Standard*, March 11, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-to-buy-30-us-predator-drones-for-3-bn-to-counter-china-pakistan-121031000515_1.html

² "India 'Clears' \$3bn Drone Deal ahead of US Defence Secy's visit," *The Federal*, March 10, 2021, <https://thefederal.com/news/india-clears-3bn-drone-deal-ahead-of-us-defence-secys-visit/>



Source: “MQ-9B Sky Guardian/Sea Guardian,” GAA, <https://www.ga-asi.com/remotely-piloted-aircraft/mq-9b>

The MQ-9B drone is designed by the General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, based in San Diego, US. The drone is remotely controlled and can fly for 48 hours straight carrying a payload of about 3700 pounds. The MQ-9B Predator drone can fly in civilian airspace, has protection from icing - it can bear minimum temperatures of up to -41 degree Celsius and protection from lightning. It has a wingspan of 24 meters with a body length of 11.8 meters, and the fuel capacity is 6,000 pounds or 2721 kg. Payload capacity 4,800 lb. (2177 kg) across, 9 hardpoints (8 wing, 1 centerline), 800 lb. internal (363 kg), 4,000 lb. external (1814 kg) It can reach a maximum altitude above 40,000 feet and has a range of round 6,000+ nautical miles.³ This drone could be used for maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and electronic warfare creating high-risk scenarios.

The Indian armed forces are operating drones for decades for surveillance and reconnaissance. It was the first country to acquire Drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Israel in the late 1990s.⁴ With technological advancements and ongoing military modernisation programmes, the role of missile-firing drones is increasing tremendously. The US war in Afghanistan, deploying of drones in armed forces around the world and more recent use of armed drones in Armenia-Azerbaijan clashes have brought armed drones under the spotlight.⁵ India also wanted to equip its armed forces with the latest and advanced armed drones. The decision to purchase 30 armed drones for the Indian armed forces from the US is the latest one. The purchase of MQ-9B armed drones would enhance India’s capabilities beyond surveillance and reconnaissance. India could use this drone for

³ “India to buy 30 US Predator Drones.”

⁴ Major General P K Chakravorty, “Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) Indian Perspective,” India Strategic, February 2012, https://www.indiastrategic.in/topstories1369_Unmanned_Aerial_Vehicle.htm

⁵ Abhijnan Rej, “India’s Drone Dreams – And Reality,” *The Diplomat*, October 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/indias-drone-dreams-and-reality/>

precision targeting system; anti-submarine warfare and anti-surface warfare; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; search and rescue; electronic countermeasures; oceanic maritime security initiatives; high altitude surveillance and airborne countermine capability.⁶

This growing Indo-US strategic cooperation in defence and communication sectors is going to bring severe security implication for the region, especially for Pakistan. India is going to acquire the latest weapons systems and other military hardware as a US's Major Defence Partner recognised by the US in 2016 and other export control rules would be relaxed under the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1) STA-1 status granted to India in August 2018 by the US.⁷

Earlier in 2016, India and the US signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). The agreement enabled the signatories to share logistical support, provide land, air and sea bases for resupply, refuelling and repair. It also provides for sharing of supplies and other services between the two countries. It gives them a legal framework to do the job. Later in 2018, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was signed between the two states. Under the deal, the Indian military was enabled to get the US data link, communication equipment and codes. The data link is said to be the most secure platform for communication and it provides ground-to-air communication. Under this agreement, the US agreed to share and high-tech military technology with India and also provided them with sophisticated encrypted communication technology so that India can enhance both its military technology as well its communication technology. It was done so that India could also enhance its interoperability. The purpose behind all this was to give technology to India by using which they can have better surveillance and protection of its communication networks.

These two agreements LEMOA and COMCASA paved the way for the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). Under the BECA both countries would be able to exchange geospatial intelligence through satellites, long-range navigation through topographical and aeronautical digital data and conduct pinpoint attacks against adversaries. The agreement enhances Indian access to the latest US military technology. For example, with sophisticated GPS technology, the Indian army would be able to use its ballistic or cruise missile, or drones and other weaponry with precise accuracy. The agreement acts as a stepping stone for India to get the US armed drones and other latest military technology. The BECA provides India with the legal authority to acquire

⁶ "MQ-9B Sky Guardian/Sea Guardian," General Atomics Aeronautical, <https://www.ga-asi.com/remotely-piloted-aircraft/mq-9b>

⁷ India is the first state in the south Asian region to have this status and third in the Asian nation, see US gives India STA-1 status: Here's all you need to know about it," *Money Central*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/us-gives-india-sta-1-status-heres-all-you-need-to-know-about-it-2790601.html>

MQ-9B drones from the US. Due to the mutual agreements of COMCASA, LEMOA and BECA between the global hegemon and one of the South Asian regional powers India, mutual trust has been developed due to which such high scientific technology is being transferred by the US to India.



Source: “MQ-9B Sky Guardian/Sea Guardian,” GAA

Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan and India have had ‘on’ and ‘off’ relations for the past 73 years. The addition of 30 Predator-9B drones will provide technological superiority to India. Along the Line of Control (LoC) the drones will assist in surveillance and reconnaissance of Pakistan Army posts and their activities. They will be better able to locate Pakistan’s posts, the number of soldiers, weapons and its types and revise their strategies and tactics accordingly.

India could also use this drone for a precision targeting system. The MQ-9Bs are equipped with laser-guided plus sensor technology. This updated military tech will be beneficial in securing pinpoint targeted strikes. On January 3, 2020, a similar version of this drone MQ-9 drone was used and assassinated the Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani and killing 9 people more. India could use these drones to target civilians along the LoC.

An important implication of this drone is that it could be used for maritime surveillance and anti-submarine warfare. Since these drones can hover for such long hours, detailed information about Pakistan’s submarines, midget submarines, destroyers, frigates, corvettes and all other surface ships will be available to India, directly keeping the Pakistani Navy under its observation.

Drones are well equipped with electronic warfare technologies. Electronic warfare works on the principles of the electromagnetic spectrum. The electromagnetic spectrum is a variety of frequencies ranging from microwaves to radio waves, gamma rays, visible light and X-rays. The military use of the electromagnetic spectrum or electronic warfare has been in use since the advent of the radio; militaries use the whole spectrum to support intelligence and regulate military operations. Drones will capture what frequency adversaries are using for communication and with it, subsequent information about military tactics can be retrieved. Electronic warfare technologies work on the principle that they rapidly detect the threat, signal the data and collect the specific targets. These drones have a speed of 482km/h due to their high speed they can assist Indian forces for electronic warfare.

The US is delivering the latest military technology to India, which will alter regional power dynamics and hence disturb the regional peace. Any addition in one state's military closet will spark a security dilemma and the reaction will be an arms race. The Subcontinent has seen much of this arms race and can suffer from it.

Conclusion

Owing to the animosity between the two nuclear states and due to a plethora of disputes, this 'drone deal' between the US and India can create severe security implications for Pakistan along the LoC and for its sea, land and air defences. Kashmir dispute and the recent episode of the Pulwama incident have further accelerated the situation and since February 2019 airstrikes made the situation tenser. At this point, the armed drone deal between India and the US could spark an arms race in the region. Pakistan should focus on developing similar technologies or counter technologies to safeguard its land, sea and air defences.