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USA Aircraft Refuelling at A&N Islands

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Why in News

Recently, a **USA Navy P-8A long range Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA)** landed at **Port Blair** in the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands for refuelling **under the bilateral logistics support agreement**.

This is the first time the USA got access to A&N under the **Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)**.

Key Points

- **LEMOA:**
 - It allows both countries to **have access to each other's designated military facilities** for refueling and replenishment.
 - Signed by India in **2016**.

- **Other foundational military communication agreements with the USA:**
 - **General Security of Military Information Agreement:**
 - GSOMIA allows **militaries to share the intelligence** gathered by them.
 - Signed by India in **2002**.
 - An extension to the GSOMIA, the **Industrial Security Annex (ISA)**, was signed at the 2+2 dialogue in **2019**.
 - ISA provides a framework for exchange and protection of classified military information **between the USA and Indian defence industries**.
 - **Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement:**
 - Valid for 10 years, COMCASA aims to provide a legal framework for the **transfer of highly sensitive communication security equipment from the USA to India** that will streamline and facilitate interoperability between their armed forces.
 - Signed by India in 2018.
- **BECA:** The USA is looking forward to India signing the **Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial cooperation (BECA)**, at the next India-USA 2+2 ministerial dialogue likely to be held in October, 2020.

BECA will **allow India to use the geospatial maps of the USA** to get pinpoint military accuracy of automated hardware systems and weapons such as cruise and ballistic missiles.
- **Strategic Significance of A&N Islands:**
 - It is **close to the Strait of Malacca** and global sea lanes of communication.
 - A&NI has become an important element of **India's "Act East Policy"** of engaging with countries in the region east of India.
 - The Andaman and Nicobar chain of islands could be used as a **basis for Indian maritime power projection into the Indo-Pacific** and even beyond into the south-west Pacific.
 - The A&NI could be used for India's **Third Fleet** (other two are the Western and Eastern Fleets) **and the trans-shipment hub** at Car Nicobar, could potentially be a strategic game-changer, rivalling the ports of Singapore or Colombo.
 - Changing nature of warfare has led to the expansion of scope of a **Tri-Command Service**.

As Andaman and Nicobar is the first Tri-Command structure in India, development of military infrastructure at A&NI is a key requirement in India's security strategy.

- **Increased Maritime Interactions with Quad Countries:**
 - **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)** is the **informal strategic** dialogue between **India, USA, Japan and Australia** with a shared objective to ensure and support a “**free, open and prosperous**” **Indo-Pacific region**.
 - There has been a sharp increase in India’s **maritime interactions with the Quad countries** on a bilateral basis centred around information sharing for improved **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** in the **Indian Ocean Region** and **Indo-Pacific**.
 - MDA is defined by the **International Maritime Organization** as the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment of a country.
 - India has **logistics agreements** with all three Quad countries — **Australia, Japan and the USA**. India has also signed **maritime information sharing agreements** with Australia and Japan and a similar agreement is in the works with the USA .

Way Forward

- The increase in India’s maritime interactions with the Quad countries will **strengthen India’s position in the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific**.
- **Strategic balancing** is the key to move forward in relationships with powerful countries like the USA.
- India and the USA must now strive to complete **the unfinished agreements** and set the course for a **Comprehensive Strategic Global Partnership**.

Source: TH