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Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement

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This article is based on **“The Delhi-DC strategic dance”** which was published in The Hindustan Times on 27/10/2020. It talks about the implications of signing the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA) agreement between India and US.

Recently, the **Indo-United States (US) 2+2 talks** were conducted. The most striking outcome from these talks was the formal signing of the **Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA)**.

BECA is the last of **four foundational defence agreements** between the two countries that allow a much higher level of military cooperation in technology, interoperability, and defence manufacturing.

The signing of the BECA marks the end of the prolonged phase of mutual trust-building and sets the stage for more expansive security cooperation.

What is BECA?

- The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement largely pertains to geospatial intelligence, and sharing information on maps and satellite images for defence.
- BECA will provide Indian military systems with a high-quality GPS to navigate and missiles with real-time intelligence to precisely target the adversary.
- It will give access to topographical and aeronautical data and products that will aid navigation and targeting.

Other Foundational Agreements

The BECA follows three other agreements:

- The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was signed by the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee back in 2002.

It aims to protect the military information shared by the US.

- The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was signed a full 14 years later in 2016.
It aims to provide mutual logistics support around the world.
- The Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was signed in 2018
It aims to facilitate communication between the weapons platforms of the two armed forces.

Significance of Signing of BECA

- **Converging Indo-Pacific Strategies:** Signing of BECA will fast-forward the integration of the **Indo-Pacific strategies** of their two countries.
 - Further, this is in sync with increasing formalization of **QUAD**, which can be seen in the recent joining of Australia in the Malabar naval exercises.
 - India will be able to keep a close watch on the movements of Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean.
 - Moreover, its signing comes at a time when India is locked in one of its most hostile standoffs with China along their disputed border in the Himalayan region.
- **Deep Military Implications:** While LEMOA means one partner trusts the other enough to expose its valuable assets, COMCASA means one is confident that it can rely on encrypted systems to connect the two militaries, and BECA means it can share highly classified information in real time without fear of being compromised.
 - All this signals the level of trust that has developed between the two countries and their militaries, faced with an increasingly aggressive China.
 - BECA allows more intensive engagement between the armed forces —from interoperability to intelligence-sharing and joint defence research to production of weapons.
- **Multi-Polar World Order:** Substantive and institutionalised cooperation between the two defence establishments will serve the long-term interests of a rising India and an America that is restructuring its global security burden.

Associated Issues

- **India's Aversion to Alliance System:** Signing of these four foundational agreements would mean India getting strategically more close to US.
 - From the perspective of the US, in order to counter China, it would want India to be getting close to an alliance system.
 - However, one aspect which remains unchanged is the Indian strategic establishment's aversion to the term alliance.
 - From the heyday of non-alignment to the present day possibilities of multi-alignment, this idea that alliances are inherently bad has been a constant in India's mainstream strategic thinking.
- **Dependence on Russia:** India is one of the world's biggest defence equipment buyers, but around 60-70% of its inventory is supplied by Russia.

Further, the US wants India to move away from Russian equipment and platforms, as it feels this may expose its technology and information to Russia.
- **Compromising Strategic Autonomy:** Many foreign policy experts in India are of the view that, by synchronising its systems with those of the US, it will enable the US to enter its decision-making loop.

It is something that no sovereign country would like.
- **Divergence of Foreign Policy Interest:** There is divergence on foreign policy interests between US and India, especially relating to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

On account of Indian Ocean issues, the US would want India's cooperation in the South China Sea, but India's primary naval challenge is in the western and north-western Indian Ocean.

Way Forward

- **Expanding Scope of Convergence:** If both the US and India want India to become a genuine strategic balancer to China, they need to leapfrog economic and technological cooperation.

Thus, the US and India are now in talks of an "innovation partnership" that must develop along with all the military-to-military bonhomie taking place.
- **Maintaining Strategic Autonomy:** India must clarify to the US that, it can sign the civil nuclear pact, it can sign foundational defence agreements, it can converge on the Indo-Pacific but it won't lead to an alliance relationship.

Further, India should realise agreements are a scrap of paper, unless they are backed by a mutuality of interest at the given time. Therefore, must continue its efforts of strategic hedging with our global powers.

Conclusion

Signing of BECA will allow India and the US to act together and get into a better position to shape the regional and global environment in favour of peace and stability. However, both countries must not glamourize this signing as these agreements are not an end in

themselves they are a means to a larger end – security and prosperity of its citizens.

High-stake agreements

Of the three foundational defence pacts between India and the United States, only one has been signed

COMCASA: The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement facilitates transfer of encrypted communication systems, and is a key requirement for the U.S. to share high tech military hardware

COMCASA and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (**BECA**), which facilitates exchange of geospatial information, are pacts not signed yet due to severe criticism

- It was feared that signing these agreements would mean compromising India's age-old military ties with Russia and access to their weaponry systems

LEMOA: Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement. India signed the pact in 2016. The agreement gives militaries of both the nations access to each other's military facilities, without making it automatic or obligatory, mostly for the purposes of refuelling and replenishment



Drishti Mains Question

Signing of various defence agreements will allow India and the US to act together and get into a better position to shape the regional and global environment. Critically analyse.



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This editorial is based on **“The shade of grey”** which was published in The Hindu on October 27th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.
