

## COMCASA – Wind-Vane of Indian Foreign Policy?!

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The United States has been prodding India to sign the communications, compatibility and security agreement, better known as COMCASA, for more than a decade. COMCASA is a version of CISMOA (Communication interoperability and Security memorandum Agreement) tailored specifically for India. CISMOA is considered to be one of the three foundational agreements that the United States of America signs with its military allies. The other two agreements are LSA (Logistics Support Agreement) and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation agreement). India signed LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) in 2016 when Manohar Parrikar was the defence minister. LEMOA is a version of LSA specific to India. According to various [sources](#) in the media, India and US have also made progress in discussions on COMCASA and Indian government may take a decision regarding the agreement in the near future.

COMCASA like LEMOA has divided the strategic community in India, once again. The COMCASA-sceptics point to its intrusive nature. The Agreement envisages the usage of American military communication equipment onboard various systems bought by India from US. Since these equipment will almost certainly use American encryption standards for interoperability with other US systems, India would [need to allow American experts](#) to access such equipment periodically. One may wonder, how comfortable Indian strategic mandarins would be in allowing US technicians to inspect Indian arms in Indian military bases. Moreover, bulk of defence armaments in India is of non-US origin. Since they would be non-compliant with American communication systems, signing of COMCASA to acquire American systems would make it difficult for India to make its own different systems interoperable.

On the other hand, there is a general admission in military circles that United States is a leader in some defence technologies, if not all. Unmanned aerial vehicles, anti-

submarine warfare and aircraft carrier technologies are some fields where US has set the pace for rest of the world to follow. India, whose own armament development programmes have seen mixed success in the last 70 years, has three choices if it wants advanced warfare capabilities. It can wait for its own R&D programmes to mature, acquire the American systems, or try to get similar systems from elsewhere.

Although Indian research and development has had success in some advanced fields like Rocket engines and missiles, it is finding the going tough in many other areas. Indian armed forces cannot wait indefinitely for development of defence hardware, even as threats to the country evolve continuously. The economics of reinventing the wheel also do not seem attractive for a relatively poor country.

When [Russia bought reconnaissance drones from Israel](#) in 2011, having been impressed by their performance during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, it revealed the widening gap in advanced capabilities of US and its allies and other countries. It also underlined the fact that some advanced weapons may only be acquired from US or its allies. Although, India has previously bought drones of various types and uses from Israel, getting the more advanced versions directly from US would give Indian forces an extra punch in combat ability. This is but only one example where India can gain by signing COMCASA, as US has insisted on the agreement to part with advanced weapon systems. But COMCASA is more than just a military agreement. Signing on the dotted lines would also be a foreign policy statement by India.

In the last two decades, New Delhi has visibly gotten closer to the US. It has also reaped benefits from this policy. Washington has helped Delhi become a de-facto nuclear power with the 1-2-3 nuclear agreement. It has also helped India join multilateral arms agreements like the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), Wassenaar arrangement and the Australia group. In return, India has shown willingness to engage with US on different geopolitical issues. These include strategic alignment in the Indo-pacific and issues related to Iran and Afghanistan. India has also increasingly bought weapons directly from US. This was unthinkable barely 20 years ago.

Unfortunately for the two countries, election of Donald Trump to the White House has been a major disruption. The new president's "*America first*" policy has countered much of the goodwill generated in India by previous administrations. In pursuing the mercantilist policy, Washington has refused to differentiate between allies and/or competitors. His

pressure on India on trade issues has deeply disappointed the Americophiles in New Delhi. Recently, India has **threatened to impose tariffs** on US imports as retaliation for Washington slapping steel and aluminum tariffs on the country. At the same time, India and China **have come closer** under the shadow of Trump's trade war.

The CAATSA (countering America's adversaries through sanctions act) law enacted by US Congress has also lead to increasing doubts in India about the reliability of US as an ally. The law directs the US administration to punish foreign countries doing business with Russian defence and intelligence apparatus by applying sanctions against them. India is one of the countries likely to be affected by CAATSA. The US administration is working with the Indian government as well as the legislature in Washington to find a solution to the issue. But debate in India regarding the unpredictability of US actions has gained momentum.

India has tried to maintain independent strategic autonomy and foreign policy for much of the last 70 years. This has been the bedrock of Indian strategic thought for much of its post-independence history. It was this nature of Indian policy which was reflected in the Indian initiative in founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the cold war.

Modi became the first Indian PM to miss the NAM summit in 2016, the same year India signed LEMOA with US. But changing US positions on issues vital to Indian interests seems to be prompting a rethink. Between April and May 2018, PM Modi visited both China and Russia in quick succession. The visits were unplanned, informal and likely the result of Indian initiative. They have been followed by conciliatory and friendly statements by relevant parties. Since the informal summits, the defence minister, prime minister and president of India have **repeatedly reiterated** their commitment to multi-polarity and strategic autonomy. India has **also stated** publicly that its relations with Russia are not negotiable.

Pragmatic geopolitics dictates that India must not reject the extended arm of friendship of the lone superpower on the globe. But last year and half of developments in Washington could be pushing India to relapse into the non-alignment mode. This time India may be seeking middle ground between US on one side and China and Russia on the other.

Whether or not New Delhi signs the COMCASA could be indicative of where Indian foreign policy goes from here. If the negotiations on the agreement fall through, one may conclude that American ties with India have hit a trough. The geopolitical implications of

such a development cannot be overstated. The two democracies could again rue missed chances and lost opportunities in the future.

On the other hand, if New Delhi signs the COMCASA, we can deduce that the two countries have managed to tide over their differences, or at least agreed to disagree, in favour of better geostrategic relations. This will need a lot of foresight and statesmanship from the leaders in Delhi and Washington though.

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