

Nice Chit-Chat, Great Win-Win



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Ministerial meets are terribly boring events. Usually, they're all about talking points and no achievement. While expecting nothing of the 2+2 summit between the Indian and US defence and foreign ministers, one is pleasantly surprised to hear that the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (Comcasa) has finally been signed.

This single agreement is, perhaps, the most epochal event in India-US ties since the 2008 India-US nuclear agreement that eventually led to India's waiver at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

India's military is a hopeless jumble of Western and Eastern equipment, none of which talk together, and when they are made to talk to each other, things tend to go horribly wrong. Islanding a portion of one's inventory to 'talk to' US equipment means that the same protocols apply to all such equipment to talk to each other.

Right now, even India's Western-sourced equipment don't talk to each other. So, India's Israeli airborne radars don't talk to its US maritime surveillance aircraft, which, in turn, don't talk to its French-supplied submarines. When one is made to follow a communications equipment standard, it ensures that not only does our equipment talk to US equipment, but they also talk to each other more effectively.

This not only improves India's ability to fight alongside the US Navy better, but also alongside several other global navies with similar equipment that are major players in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and Singapore.

Why? Mostly because the US communications core — the Link 16, the gold standard of data transfer — can transfer huge amounts of contextual-

ised data over vast distances in a combat-relevant way. So, while there are several systems available in the market, none has the backup of being linked to such an extensive network of satellites and sub-sea communications networks.

Also, almost all developed countries follow the US data transfer and communications standard. So, in the past, if India had unique, but standardised, equipment on just our Sukhois and Phalcons, the Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control System (Awacs) would have been able to alert the Sukhois to an impending movement of, say, Chinese aircraft into Tibet only at the distance of some 300-400 km.

But a Link 16-enabled Phalcon talking to a Link 16-enabled Rafale can directly receive inputs (subject to bilateral intelligence-sharing agreements) from Taiwanese, Vietnamese, South Korean and Japanese intel assets of the aircraft's movement to Tibet, well before India's surveillance aircraft picked them up. So, now, any intelli-

gence gained by the major Pacific navies east of the Malacca choke-point can be directly transferred to enabled assets of the Indian Navy, bilateral politics so allowing. Critically, this means that should any of these countries not want to get into an India-China tiff, they can heavily tip the balance in India's favour without firing a single shot.

It is no exaggeration to say that this has, by far, been the most productive ministerial bilateral in recent India-US history. In one fell swoop, without serious financial investments, India just bought itself a treasure trove of intelligence on its major strategic competitor, and turned the 'Quad' from pipe-dream to reality. A win-win to make every fiscal conservative happy.

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