

KEY CONCERNS ADDRESSED Real-time info-sharing on China planned; Comcasa can be terminated with 6-mth notice

US' Comcasa Assurance: Won't Share India Data Without Consent

Dokalam face off turning point for Indian position when it realised benefit of US intelligence

New Delhi: The United States has agreed to address key Indian concerns on reliability and sharing of secure data through India-specific legally binding assurances in the just-negotiated Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (Comcasa), with the rider that they will be valid as long as the agreement is not terminated.

ET has reliably gathered that both sides have agreed to an arrangement by which either side can terminate the agreement by giving each other an advance notice of six months.

The Dokalam face off was the turning point for the Indian position on the Comcasa when it realised the benefit of US intelligence on Chinese troop deployments in calibrating its approach. This sort of intelligence was not available with India.

The first important assurance the US has given is that, as long as the Comcasa is in play, it will ensure any equipment provided under the agreement will remain operational at all times. This was an important issue for India because it wanted a safeguard against the US using the Comcasa tool to limit or influence Indian decision-making in deployment and use of the US-origin equipment.

The second assurance was on the security of data obtained from India. While the Comcasa might make it technically possible for the US to access Indian data because the encryption and decryption codes for communication equipment will be sourced from the US, insiders said,

India has managed to secure a specific assurance from Washington that it will not share Indian data with any entity without prior consent from New Delhi.

It's, however, learnt that India will look to address this issue more definitively in the discussions on implementation of the agreement. In those conversations, New Delhi may press for specially devised encryption-decryption codes only for India.

Further, sources said, both sides have reached an understanding that in case of a conflict with any other agreement arrived at during the purchase of any specific military equipment from the US, the Comcasa shall prevail.

SIGNIFICANCE OF COMCASA

The Comcasa provides the legal framework for the US to part with its sensitive communication equipment and codes to enable transfer of real-time operational information. This equipment is largely used for ground-to-air communication, installed US-origin military aircraft to enable best battle situation awareness. The US data link is considered the most secure communication platform, which will also allow India access to big data base of American intelligence, including real-time imagery.

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THE DOKALAM LESSON

One of most significant outcomes of the Comcasa is likely to be the creation of a military communications hub that will house the Comcasa-compliant equipment to enable real-time data link with a similar facility in the US.

During the Dokalam face-off, informed sources told ET that India did encounter difficulties in obtaining latest information on troop reinforcements and deployments deep inside Chinese territory. While the US did help with some information, it came with a certain time-lag as it had to be physically passed through different security layers to reach India. This sort of exchange will technically now be possible electronically and on a real-time basis. Given the way China has revamped its battle communication systems and strengthened its electronic warfare capabilities, sources said, access to US data will make qualitatively significant impact on Indian military planning against China.

The text of the Comcasa has been firmed up and is slated to be taken up by the Cabinet Committee on Security on Wednesday just ahead of the crucial Indo-US 2+2 meeting here on Thursday.

This meet, which has been postponed a couple of times, will have US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and

Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis in joint bilateral conversation with their Indian counterparts Sushma Swaraj and Nirmala Sitharaman.

Ahead of the 2+2 meet, US has given India STA-1 status, a special authorisation for defence trade which is only meant for US allies. This allows for much easier approval process for military sales to India.

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Once the Comcasa is signed, the US government will be able to give the go-ahead to install the best communication equipment on relevant platforms being sold to India.

As part of this arrangement, the US will most likely gain access to data generated from India. Also, it will allow Indian and US forces to conduct joint operations with greater ease given the seamlessness that may be possible due to same communication channels.

Comcasa text firmed up and is slated to be taken up by Cabinet Committee on Security today just ahead of Indo-US 2+2 meeting here tomorrow

