

## India, US set to sign pact for secure military communications

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INDIA AND the US are likely to sign the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), a bilateral pact between the two countries for secure military communications, during the inaugural '2+2' meeting in New Delhi in the first week of September.

Official sources told *The Indian Express* that the government had made up its mind to sign the agreement which had been pending for nearly 15 years now. The government, sources said, has told the Americans to send the final text of the agreement, so that the process of signing can be expedited in time for the '2+2' meeting.

After being postponed twice this year, the inaugural '2+2' meeting is scheduled to be held in New Delhi on September 6. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be attending the meeting, along with their American counterparts, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defence James Mattis.

The government considered concerns about intrusive American access to encrypted Indian military communication systems and sharing of that data with other countries. There is also a fear among defence services that a lot of Russian-origin and indigenous Indian military platforms may not be compatible with COMCASA.

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# India-US pact

“It is eventually a matter of trust. When we are importing so much military equipment from the US, do we really believe that they can’t monitor things that they want to? We have to build adequate checks and balances in the India-specific agreement about this access to our communication systems. The Americans are equally concerned about the Russian S-400 system because they feel it could access their systems in use with us. It is something we have to deal with as long as we are heavily importing military equipment,” official sources said.

On concerns about violation of Indian sovereignty due to visits by US inspectors to Indian bases to inspect the COMCASA- safeguarded equipment, sources said that it was no longer an issue.

COMCASA is meant to provide a legal

framework for transfer of communication security equipment from the US to India that would facilitate “interoperability” between their forces — and potentially with other militaries that use US-origin systems for secured data links. American officials contend that COMCASA will facilitate the use of high-end secured communication equipment to be installed on military platforms being sold to India, and fully exploit their potential.

India’s armed forces, they argue, are currently dependent on less secure, commercially available communication systems on high-end American platforms like C-130Js and the P-8I maritime surveillance aircraft. These platforms are, therefore, unable to share data in real time with other friendly militaries using American platforms, besides creating problems of interoperability during training exercises and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

The general agreement signed by the US with other countries is called the Communication and Information on Security Memorandum of Agreement (CIS-MOA) but the name was changed to COMCASA to reflect its India-specific nature. A US military negotiating team was in New Delhi last month to respond to Indian objections and formulate a mutually acceptable text for the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement.

COMCASA is part of a set of three military agreements that the US considers “foundational” for a functional military relationship. In August 2016, India had signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which allows the military of each country to replenish from the other’s bases. Negotiations on the third agreement, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA), have not yet begun.