

India and US Signed a Game-changer Defence Deal, Amid the Rise of What Could be a New Bipolarity

By [Uriel Araujo](#)

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After the third annual “2+2” high-level US-Indian talks in Delhi on October 27, a very important defence pact was signed: the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). With so much focus on the American election, little attention has been given to this crucial deal. Last Tuesday, the Australian navy joined Indian, American, and Japanese warships for the annual Malabar exercises. This is yet another sign of the growing convergence between the four QUAD countries (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). Both events must be seen in light of Indian and US intentions to “counter” China.

The BECA was signed nearly a week before the US elections – and it certainly was a kind of diplomatic victory for Trump’s administration. Regarding a future administration, we should not expect any major change. **Joe Biden**, who has declared victory in the US election (Trump is contesting the outcome), is on the record stating in 2006 that his “dream” is for the US and India to be the “two closest nations in the world”. According to a policy paper released by the Biden campaign during the election, India is a “high priority” and, among other things, the US should support Indian aspirations to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

After the two previous 2+2 talks in 2018 and 2019, the US and India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). The former gave mutual access to each other’s military facilities for the purpose of refueling, while the latter provides New Delhi with classified information from the US Navy. The latest BECA, in its turn, takes such cooperation to a whole new level. This was made possible and even fast-tracked partly because both Trump’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the COVID-19 outbreak have brought India and the US closer.

The deal will give New Delhi access to American geospatial data and intelligence – for its missiles and drones. It will also enhance Indian automate hardware systems and weapons and will improve New Delhi’s navigation capabilities and its military targeting. On the other hand, some have voiced concerns with Indian sovereignty.

The agreement, after all, also gives the US a high degree of control over Indian operations. According to security analyst Bharat Karnad, a former member of India’s National Security Council and an emeritus professor at the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi, [it could even open the possibility of Washington tampering with data and misdirecting Indian missiles](#). The full texts (and even official summaries) of the agreements the US has with some of its allies, such as the Philippines, remain classified and it fuels suspicions and reservations among part of Indian strategic analysts. According to a [2018 paper](#) by Abhijnan Rej, a Fellow

with Observer Research Foundation's Strategic Studies Programme, some Indian officers fear that becoming part of any military communication network with the US would make India vulnerable to Pakistan tapping – because Pakistan, India's main rival, is a member of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) Partner Network. The US claims such networks do not necessarily interface with each other but such claim is met with some skepticism.

If some sectors in India are concerned about being part of a military network together with Pakistan, the US worries about Indian-Russian relations and cooperation. From the American point of view, the fact that Russia remains India's top supplier of weapons – and has been so since Cold War era – is in itself a concern. Moreover, Moscow is eager to sell New Delhi its S-400 Triumf anti-aircraft weapons system by 2021. Washington fears that the presence of any Russian defense system into an Indian military network (where US hardware and data is also present) would expose some features of American platforms to Moscow.

That is probably why the US has even threatened India with sanctions over its decision to purchase such system from Russia – top diplomat Alice Wells, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, claimed in May that could be possible. From Washington's perspective, however, there is plenty to be concerned: one should also remember that the Kudankulam nuclear power plant (KKNPP) counts heavily on future nuclear cooperation with Moscow.

The BECA agreement holds tremendous geopolitical importance for the future of the region, especially when we consider the tensions between India and China – as well as [Chinese-Japanese tensions](#), [Indian-Japanese relations](#) and concerns over QUAD becoming a kind of a [“new Asian NATO”](#) in the Indo-Pacific region. Washington and New Delhi certainly have an area of common interest regarding Beijing's growing power. The US, in turn, have been engaged in a trade war with China and in what many describe as [a new cold war](#).

For India, such a game-changing deal brings also a kind of dilemma. In Indian political landscape, the anti-American left – which has always opposed the Indian-US strategic partnership – has been largely irrelevant for a while. The hegemonic Hindu right has traditionally rejected Western and American cultural influence while reaffirming Indian national culture and values. BECA will demand a closer political relationship with the US. Will such relationships be informed by narratives of common values like democracy and the rule of law?

As for the future, India could further strengthen its ties with the US (potentially damaging its relationship with Russia by doing so). It would confirm the fears of many about the QUAD becoming a “new NATO” and it would dramatically increase tensions regionally and globally – this scenario would represent the further rise of a supposed [“new bipolarity”](#) in global politics instead of multipolarity.

Or will India continue pursue its own traditional “middle path” way, engaging with both the US and Russia. In this case, together with allies such as Indonesia, and as part of the ongoing “conceptual war” – over what the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) must be – India could try and push [its own view of the IPR](#).

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Uriel Araujo is a researcher with a focus on international and ethnic conflicts.

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Articles by: **[Uriel Araujo](#)**

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