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India-U.S. Naval Cooperation Gathers Momentum Despite Doubts

India and the United States have ratcheted up their [bilateral military relations](#) through the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed at the end of August that provides the basis for reciprocal usage of each other's military facilities. The agreement is seen as a game changer for India's foreign policy and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has found the United States a willing partner to support India's military modernization. Two other similar [agreements](#) - Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA) - are under active consideration and would add to the robustness of the India-U.S. bilateral defense cooperation. In this *Policy Brief*, Dr. Vijay Sakhuja, Director of the National Maritime Foundation in New Delhi, explains how for a variety of reasons, the momentum in bilateral relations is gaining despite lingering doubts.

An India Specific Agreement

The LEMOA is an India specific agreement between the armed forces of India and the United States and is quite similar to the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) which the United States has signed with more than 80 nations and most of these are non-military U.S. allies. The agreement enables India and the United States to provide basic logistic supplies such as water, oil and lubricants, food and provisions, and clothing to the militaries of the two countries on reciprocal basis. As far as services are concerned, these include repair and maintenance of military equipment, supply of spare parts and components, port and stevedore, medical arrangements and basic communication facilities. By their very nature, these are basic

services in the view of maritime forces and are extended to any navy by another country during goodwill visits, port calls, as well as during emergencies.

It is useful to mention that the above arrangements are not being offered free of charge; instead the LEMOA sets out procedures for billing for these to enable accounting for such transactions. These would be either on cash payments or on the reciprocal provision of logistic support, supplies, and services. The agreement comes into operation only during port visits, joint exercises, joint training, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

The LEMOA is also not a carte blanche agreement; instead there are a number of inbuilt checks and balances and a number of provisions in the agreement that prevent India from getting into a military alliance with the United States. It also gives India the right to refuse any contentious joint military activity, and New Delhi is not bound by the agreement to offer logistic support to United States military when they engage in military operations overseas. This makes the LEMOA India specific.

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The LEMOA has a strong maritime component and follows several other bilateral [maritime agreements](#) signed recently such as (a) the technical arrangement for sharing of information on merchant shipping; (b) maritime security dialogue; (c) agreement on India as a major defense partner. India and the United States have also [signed](#) the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) which enables India license-free access to a wide range of dual-use technologies including arrangements for co-production and co-development of technologies. Two working groups have been established and are overseeing transfer of technology covering naval systems and aircraft carrier technology.

Domestic Opposition and Debate

The LEMOA has invited criticism in India and had to be delayed for nearly six months due to domestic political opposition. A number of Indian political parties have questioned the government's LEMOA support and [criticized](#) it as a 'fundamental departure' from India's policy of 'strategic military neutrality' and that it 'compromised Indian sovereignty' and 'surrendered strategic autonomy'. They have argued that India is falling into a trap and would be under tremendous pressure to provide basing facilities to the visiting U.S. military forces in the future.

It is also their **belief** that the agreement will result in political and strategic challenges for New Delhi and cause serious misgivings regionally and globally unless the agreement is explained and justified. There are also fears that in a worst case, New Delhi may have to choose between the United States and India's traditional partner and time tested ally Russia.

Several serving and retired Indian naval officers working as analysts at think tanks believe that not many operational and functional advantages are accrued by signing the LEMOA. India's maritime strategy defines the Indian Ocean as the primary area of operation and there are a number of non-U.S. military facilities in the region which are available to the Indian Navy to visit and obtain necessary logistic support. Further, the Indian Navy has never been denied access to foreign ports in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, by adding India to its list of access locations, the United States does not gain any distinct advantages; it has formal operational and logistic arrangements with a number of countries in the Indian Ocean such as Australia, Bahrain, Djibouti, Malaysia, Oman, Thailand and Singapore, as well as having its own facilities at Diego Garcia.

Furthermore, in the past, the United States' plans to use Indian military facilities for refueling its aircraft in India that were bound for operations in the Persian Gulf during the 1991 Gulf

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War were criticized. For instance, in 2007, the Communist Party of India held anti-U.S. demonstration to protest against the visit of USS Nimitz to Chennai in South India raising slogans like "Go back" and "Down with U.S. imperialism," and argued that the visit was a "**violation of our [Indian] foreign policy**". These concerns continue to prevail, but in recent time, visits by U.S. warships to Indian ports have been welcomed.

Another important issue relating to LEMOA is the U.S. Navy's policy to 'neither confirm nor deny' the presence of nuclear weapons on board its ships calling at foreign ports for obtaining logistic support. It is important to recall that this policy had led to a nearly **three-decade political impasse** between United States and New Zealand after the latter enacted domestic legislation in 1986 which forbid nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered ships to enter New Zealand waters. The United States had imposed sanctions, declared New Zealand "a friend, but not an ally" which altered the nature of the ANZUS treaty.

In India too there was an instance when some political parties and environmental groups had [protested](#) against the visit of USS Nimitz over radiation hazards. This is a contentious issue in India and has so far remained unaddressed; for its part, the Indian government has chosen to skirt it.

Unlike these critics, many in the military and the Indian [strategic community](#) believe that the agreement is a harbinger of a number of exceptional opportunities for military cooperation which can potentially lead to a number of other cooperative ventures to support the 'Make in India' defense programs. These opportunities may include facilities and support arrangements unique to U.S. Navy's maintenance and repair requirements, warehousing for stores, and even the storage of U.S. ammunition and ordnance in Indian facilities. Similarly, many analysts in the United States believe that there are opportunities to make India-U.S. strategic partnership more robust and relevant to the changing times particularly for the United States 'rebalance to Asia' strategy.

Operational Opportunities

The text of the agreement states that LEMOA comes into operation during port visits, joint exercises, joint training, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Geographically, the Pacific Command (PACOM) area of responsibility stretches from the western United States to India's western border and from Antarctica to the North Pole covers India. Any LEMOA related naval operations that take place in the western Indian Ocean would fall under the Central Command (CENTCOM), which has its own area of responsibility encompassing 20 countries of the Middle East including Israel, Central Asia, South Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Red Sea, Gulf waters and the western portion of the Indian Ocean.

The LEMOA can potentially address the Indian concern of being limited to the PACOM area (i.e., the Asia Pacific) and only a part of the Indian Ocean and this could help Indian Navy access United States military facilities in Djibouti and maintain a near continuous presence in the Gulf of Aden. Further the joint Malabar series of naval exercises could be held in the Gulf of Aden adding to the discomfort of the Chinese who are now building military facilities in Djibouti for use by the PLA Navy.

Political Drivers for Signing the LEMOA

Apart from the operational sphere, there are at least four political reasons which encouraged India and the United States to push through LEMOA. First, there was pressure from the U.S. side on the Modi government to sign the agreement given

the fact that President Obama has invested enormous political and diplomatic capital in the relationship and would prefer to see some agreements such as LEMOA to be concluded before finishing his term later during the year. Second, Prime Minister Modi's government is keen to showcase the successes of its foreign policy given that the agreement could not be signed during the two terms of the previous Congress led United Progressive Alliance government.

Third, Modi government wants to leverage the U.S. technological and military industrial complex to ensure that the 'Make in India' program is taken forward. Fourth, there are the external factors such as China's rise, its naval assertiveness and the growing nexus between China and Pakistan exemplified by the Chinese investment of \$46 billion in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and the recent announcement to supply six conventional attack submarines which encourage the Indian government to sign the LEMOA.

The China Factor

Pakistan and China have watched with interest the signing of LEMOA. Although there has been no official statement on the issue from Pakistan, it is fair to assume Islamabad may have obtained an assurance from the U.S. side that the agreement 'would not hurt Islamabad's interests.' Unlike Pakistan, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson characterized the agreement as 'normal' and observed that 'cooperation between India and the United States would work to promote stability and development of the region' and 'we are glad to see it happen.' However, some among the Chinese strategic community have questioned the political and strategic reasoning behind the agreement and cautioned that the LEMOA may 'irritate China, Pakistan or even Russia.'

The Indian Dilemmas

India appears to have taken note of the guarded approach adopted by Beijing on the LEMOA and can be expected to dispel any misgivings about the agreement among the Chinese leaders. Although India accrues advantages by collaborating with the United States, it has a 'neighbor's dilemma' and it cannot afford to antagonize China, keeping in mind that settlement of the boundary dispute amicably through dialogue is a top agenda of the Modi government.

India also sees China as an opportunity with their bilateral trade touching over \$71 billion in 2015. As such, India may not be willing to sacrifice economic dividends accrued from its engagement with China at the 'altar of politics' led by the United States.

Notwithstanding the above dilemmas, India wants to leverage the

two-decade long bilateral defense cooperation with the United States and graduate from a buyer-seller relationship to a higher plane involving co-development and joint production. Significantly, the United States had responded favorably and India has decided to position the DTTI high on the agenda. Even if it is beginning on a modest scale, it would graduate to more sophisticated levels.

The India-U.S. relationship is at an **all-time high** and the defense trade has touched \$15 billion. Both countries have common position on Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. At another level, the bilateral trade in goods and services has touched \$105 billion and with over 40 work groups on a variety of issues ranging from health, urban planning, space, and cyber have been set up.

In essence, the Indian political leadership believes that the country cannot miss the opportunity to participate and partake from the immense technological and military edge of the United States and leverage it to advantage even if India has to selectively forego strategic autonomy.

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***About the Rising Powers Initiative
and Sigur Center for Asian Studies***

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