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Key defence agreement with the US finally within reach

Three areas of differences remain in transfer of communications equipment

By Ajai Shukla

A key defence agreement with the US that India once staunchly opposed, is set to see light of the day. After intensive negotiations in New Delhi from Monday to Wednesday, only three areas of disagreement remain in finalizing the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which will allow the US to transfer highly secure communications equipment to India.

Top defence ministry sources said negotiations were conducted with unusual purpose, with both sides hoping the agreement could be announced at the inaugural “two-plus-two” US-India dialogue on July 6, when Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will jointly meet their American counterparts, Mike Pompeo and Jim Mattis.

Agreement on those three areas remains elusive and at least one more round of negotiations would be required. A key part of the dispute relates to “sovereignty issues”, including visits by US inspectors to Indian bases where the COMCASA-safeguarded equipment is deployed. Business Standard learns that the proposals India provided to break the deadlock are being taken back by the US legal negotiating team to Washington, for legal vetting.

Similar issues led to a decade of Indian resistance to signing the Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) – as the agreement was earlier named.

Since India objected to signing a blanket agreement like CISMOA, which several other countries had signed, its name was changed to COMCASA to convey an India-specific nature.

For similar reasons, India also resisted two other agreements that the US regards as ‘foundational’ for a viable defence partnership. Eventually, in August 2016, the US and India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which allows both countries’ militaries to replenish from the other’s bases and facilities, subject to permission. India has no similar agreement with any other country, not even Russia. Negotiations on the third agreement, termed Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA), will follow COMCASA, say defence ministry sources.

Without COMCASA, the US has been legally obliged to supply India weaponry equipped with commercially available communications systems in place of the more capable equipment safeguarded by COMCASA. When the Indian Navy bought the P-8I maritime aircraft, Boeing supplied it without CISMOA-safeguarded voice and data channels — called Data Link-11 and Link-16 — through which the P-8I alerts friendly naval forces about enemy submarines. The absence of these links prevents the generation of a Common Tactical Picture with partner navies that operate over CISMOA-protected links.

The non-availability of Link-16 also prevents Indian fighter aircraft from generating a “common air picture” with friendly air forces. Non-signature of CISMOA also denies India precision Global Positioning System (GPS) gear, and state-of-the-art guidance for the Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) that the air force is procuring for its fighter aircraft.

Unless COMCASA is signed soon, the 15 Chinook CH-47F helicopters that Boeing is building for India in Philadelphia will have less sophisticated navigation and radio equipment than US Army Chinooks.

Army orders force restructuring

By Ajay Banerjee

The Army has issued a formal order that looks to re-cast, right-size and restructure the officer cadre so as to make it ready for future battles. There are around 39,000 officers in the Army.

A high-level committee headed by the Military Secretary—a Lieut General rank officer—has been tasked to study all aspects and submit a report by November-end. A “convening order” for cadre restructuring has been issued by Vice-Chief of the Army Lt Gen Devraj Anbu. The Tribune was the first to report in its edition dated June 13 that Army Chief General Bipin Rawat had okayed cadre restructuring. The “convening order” issued on June 18 lays down terms of reference for the committee.

The recommendations of the Ajai Vikram Singh Committee (AVSC) will be kept in mind. The report submitted by former Defence Secretary Ajai Vikram Singh was accepted in 2004.

The committee will make projections for futuristic growth and consequent manpower requirements.

“The cadre-review exercise should not be misconstrued as a process of up-gradation of posts, or increase in number of higher ranks or be driven by competitive pressure from other services,” says the order.

Futuristic projections should form the basis for induction and reduction of officers. An existing study on rightsizing will be considered. The committee will also “examine and identify likely areas for reduction, with focus on the base (entry level)”, says the order. At present, upward cadre mobility of Colonel is slow. The committee has been asked to review existing Corps and even suggest a merger. The Army wants segregation of combat and administrative manpower needs.

It is also looking to empower jawans and identify posts on which they can be promoted. The issue of officers who get overlooked at the level of Lieut Colonel (about 36-37 years of age), but continue in service till 54 years of age, will also be addressed. The committee will also suggest what should be the ratio of short-service commissioned officers, who will leave after serving for 10-14 years.

The review comes amid rising wage bills. In the ongoing fiscal (ending March 31, 2019), the Army salary bill is budgeted at Rs 80,945 crore and the pension bill at Rs 95,949 crore. In contrast, the modernisation budget is Rs 26,688 crore.