Indo-US Logistics Agreement LEMOA: An Assessment

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Date: 08 September 2016

On 29 August 2016, during the visit of the Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar to Washington DC, India and the United States (US) signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). Essentially, LEMOA is only a ‘functional’ agreement ‘to account for’ the essential supplies and services that one country would provide (at its port or airport facility) to the visiting military force of the other - an arrangement that the US has made with over a hundred countries worldwide. Nonetheless, the significant symbolic and strategic import of the agreement cannot be ignored. Also, while the proposal was initiated in 2002, it has fructified at a crucial time. Never before in recent history has Asia’s geopolitical and security environment been so tenuous; or the strategic interests of India and the US so convergent. Understandably, therefore, the signing of LEMOA has grabbed much attention, and raised the multitude of questions and speculations. This essay attempts to clarify a few key issues, and appraise LEMOA in terms of its strategic implications.

In the past, India and the US have transacted military logistics, but on an ad hoc basis and largely during combined exercises. LEMOA would change the nature of transactions. Hitherto, each transaction was considered as a separate case and on every occasion, paid for in cash by the side using the supplies or services. LEMOA would entail both sides maintaining a ledger for the transactions, such that much of the debit would be defrayed against the credit, and only the residual balance owing to whichever side would be paid for at the end of the fiscal year. Notably, as a standing agreement, LEMOA is indicative of the expectation on both sides that logistic transactions would increase in the coming years, and expand from combined exercises to coordinated operations.
However, the signing of LEMOA has led to a perception that India has side-stepped “its policy of not entering into a military agreement with any major”. Owing to its civilizational ethos, India’s foreign policy proscribes a ‘military alliance’, but not a ‘military agreement’. In the past, India has entered into a plethora of military agreements with major powers on various functional aspects, such as development of defence hardware, combined exercises, and sharing of operational information. Specifically with the US, in 2002, India entered into an agreement with the US to provide naval escort to the US high-value ships transiting the Malacca Straits. As another functional agreement, LEMOA represents no departure from India’s enduring policy.

Even under LEMOA, India would be able to exercise its strategic autonomy. The agreement would not restrict India’s strategic options since it is ‘tier-two’ agreement. This implies than only if and when the Indian government agrees to a US proposal to conduct a combined military exercise or operation (entailing a logistics exchange), will LEMOA come into play. For instance, since the India-US Malabar naval exercise is a standing arrangement approved by the Indian government, LEMOA will apply on all occasions that such exercises are conducted. As another instance, if hypothetically, the US seeks to undertake a coordinated military operation with India to flush out a terrorist group in a neighbouring country, based on many factors, India may decide turn down the US proposal, with no obligation to offer the US forces access to Indian logistic facilities. Furthermore, as the Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) Press Release specifically states, the agreement does not provide for setting up of a US military base on Indian soil.

The above leads to a pertinent question: Does LEMOA give the right to the US and Indian armed forces to use each others’ military bases? According to the Indian MoD Press Release, LEMOA pertains to reciprocal ‘access’ rights to military forces for logistic supplies and services comprising “food, water, billeting, transportation, petroleum, oils, lubricants, clothing, communication services, medical services, storage services, training services, spare-parts and components, repair and maintenance services, calibration services and port services”. Even at present, some of these supplies and services would be available only in the military base of the host country. In the coming years – given the existing trends – when a substantial proportion of Indian military hardware is of US origin, the visiting military force may seek to replenish even ammunition, missiles and torpedoes from the host country. LEMOA may then become analogous to the reciprocal use of military bases.
The signing of LEMOA has led to apprehensions amongst a few analysts in India that the benefits of the agreement weigh heavily in favour of the US. Such perception may not be true. The US possesses numerous globally-dispersed overseas military bases and access facilities. In an operational contingency, therefore, the US would expect India to provide essential supplies and services to its military forces only if the contingency occurs in geographic proximity of the Indian sub-continent. Such logistics may also be required for an inter-theatre shift of US forces in an emergency – such as the Persian Gulf crises of 1990, when C-141 transport planes transiting from the Philippines to the Gulf were refueled in Indian airfields – but such occasions would be rare. In contrast, India has no overseas military base, and yet its areas of interest are fast expanding much beyond its immediate neighbourhood – notably, the Persian Gulf, southern Indian Ocean and the western Pacific – where its ability to influence events is severely constrained by stretched logistic lines. Access to the US military bases in these areas, facilitated by LEMOA, would provide useful strategic alternatives to India.

In sum, therefore, while LEMOA may be functional agreement meant to facilitate military operations and exercises, it would enhance the strategic options of the involved parties; and thus pose a credible strategic deterrence to actors – both state and non-state – that seek to undermine regional security and stability. However, to address the possibility of its negative perception in terms of India’s ‘policy polarization’, New Delhi may consider entering into similar agreements with other major powers with whom its strategic interests converge.

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LEMOA, sometimes called a Logistics Services Agreement (LSA), was debated by previous governments as well, but it could not be finalized because of Indian domestic political opposition, which were themselves based on several misperceptions about LSA. But China’s growing military strength and increasing belligerence has led to a conscious strategic choice by New Delhi to get closer to Washington. This has made India a lot more comfortable with the US, which also worries about China’s behaviour and power. Read | India, US sign military logistics agreement. LEMOA permits the US and India to use each other’s facilities and provides for easier access to supplies and services for the military forces of the two countries when they are engaged in specific types of activities. With LEMOA behind them, the United States and India still have a lot to look forward to. The other two foundational agreements aside, New Delhi will no doubt be looking for clarity on where defense technology cooperation will go with its newfound MDP status. Murmurs of India flying domestically assembled U.S. F-16s and even F/A-18s have reemerged in recent months as well, suggesting a possible way forward for Modi’s Make in India initiative after Delhi decided to go with 36 French Rafale multi-role fighters in fly-away condition in a government-to-government deal last year. US and India Set to Sign Military Logistics Exchange Agreement. By Ankit Panda. The agreement would ease the way for regular logistics cooperation, which now occurs on a case-by-case basis. Top Stories. The agreement has its roots in the Access and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACAS), which was signed by the US with its NATO allies and permitted the alliance partners to access supplies, spare parts, servicing from each other’s land, air bases and ports. In the era of Cold War it was essential for allied forces to operate seamlessly anywhere in the world to support possible military confrontation with the Warsaw Pact nations. However, the bilateral relations of US with number of other countries became strategic in nature with changing geopolitics which necessitated similar agreement for more reasons than just the transit access. Slightly modified agreements were signed with Singapore, Afghanistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka. The US-India ties are bound to be strengthened further following the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in Washington on Monday. Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and the US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter were present at the time of the signing by senior officials from the two countries. With this, the protracted negotiations lasting over a decade have finally borne fruit. But it will be a mistake to construe from LEMOA that the two counties have entered into any strategic defence relationship. They have not. As the Indian Defence Ministry explained, the agreement sets out basic terms, conditions and procedures for reciprocal provision of logistic support, supplies, and service between the armed forces of India and the US. LEMOA stands for Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), a tweaked India-specific version of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), which the U.S. has with several countries it has close military to military cooperation. It is also one of the three foundational agreements as referred to by the U.S. What are the foundational agreements? The three agreements Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA) are referred to as the foundational agreements which the U.S. signs with countries with which it has close military ties.