

## 2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE: INDIA, US TO INK BECA AGREEMENT ON TUESDAY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

NEW DELHI: India and the US on Monday said they would sign the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA) setting the stage for a successful round of 2+2 talks between the defence and foreign ministers of the two countries on Tuesday. The pact represents a deepening of India-US security military ties, a testament to the rapid warming of ties in the short span of two decades.

The pact is expected to give India access to crucial information which will have implications in any potential military conflict, say analysts. These include monitoring hostile movements and precise and real time information on enemy positions during any potential border conflict, said former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal. Coming as it does in the middle of tensions between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) border, the implications of BECA are not expected to be lost on Beijing, which has long been suspicious of the growing closeness between New Delhi and Washington.

The 2+2 talks on Tuesday is seen as the last major engagement in Washington's diplomatic calendar before the US goes to the polls on 3 November. Ahead of the talks, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defence Mark Esper arrived in New Delhi on Monday. Immediately after their separate arrivals, Esper and Pompeo went in for bilateral discussions with their counterparts – Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Foreign Minister S Jaishankar. Later, the two Indian ministers also hosted their counterparts to dinner, a person privy to the programmes of two said.

"This is the third meeting of the 2+2 held regularly since 2018. The fact that it is being held in person and a just a week before the US elections shows that both countries attach value to the talks. It also shows bipartisan support for the India-US ties and convergence of political, diplomatic and security dimensions of the cooperation," said former Indian ambassador to the US, Arun Singh. "Historically, the India-US relationship has been affected by the prevailing global trends. In this case, the rise of China is giving the necessary tailwind to the relationship. This has gained further impetus with China's aggressive posturing in the South China Sea, against Taiwan, along the LAC and the East China Sea besides its Wolf Warrior diplomacy," he added.

A statement from the Indian defence ministry said Singh and Esper "reviewed bilateral defence cooperation spanning military to military cooperation, secure communication systems and information sharing, defence trade and industrial issues and also discussed ways to take bilateral cooperation forward." While expressing satisfaction at the "close engagements between the respective Armed Forces" they also explored "potential new areas of cooperation," it said.

"The two ministers expressed satisfaction that agreement of BECA will be signed during the visit. US Secretary of Defence welcomed Australia's participation in the exercise Malabar 2020," it said. The second was a reference to Australia joining the naval exercises that so far included the US, India and Japan. It adds a naval dimension to the "Quad" – comprising India, Japan, US and Australia, a grouping that China has been deeply suspicious of.

On Tuesday, Pompeo and Esper are first expected to visit the National War Memorial before heading to Hyderabad House for the "2+2" discussions. After the 2+2 talks, Pompeo and Esper

are to call on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Though India has been circumspect about the issues on the table, India's border tensions with China are expected to figure in the talks. Speaking to reporters last week, Pompeo had said:

"I'm also sure that my meetings will also include discussions on how free nations can work together to thwart the threats posed by the Chinese Communist Party."

New Delhi is the first stop for Pompeo who is to travel to Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Indonesia in a bid to forge a broad front against an increasingly assertive China, which has been making political and military inroads across Asia. In Sri Lanka and the Maldives, China has financed and built various infrastructure. In Indonesia, Pompeo is expected to discuss growing Chinese activities in the disputed South China Sea.

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