

Hurtling toward the Precipice of War, Indian Prime Minister Modi Cements Indo-US Alliance

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to Washington this week marked a watershed in the transformation of India into a frontline state in US imperialism's military-strategic offensive against China.

This offensive—known in Washington parlance as the “pivot to Asia,” or “rebalance”—has already seen the US redeploy the bulk of its naval and air power to the Indo-Pacific region, strengthen military ties with traditional regional allies, elaborate plans for a massive aerial and sea bombardment of China (Air-Sea Battle), incite various Southeast Asian states to press their territorial claims against China in the South China Sea, and stage armed “overflight” and “freedom of navigation” exercises to challenge Chinese sovereignty over South China Sea islets.

The joint statement issued Tuesday by Modi and President Barack Obama following their talks outlined plans to increase Indo-US military cooperation across the Indian Ocean and Asian Pacific regions and in all “domains... land, maritime, air, space and cyber (space).”

India is to give the US military routine access to its ports and military bases for resupply, repairs and rest. Washington, for its part, has recognized India as a “Major Defense Partner,” meaning it can now buy the advanced US weaponry made available only to the Pentagon's closest allies.

The Obama administration also pledged to press for India's speedy inclusion in the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG), although India has not fulfilled a key condition of membership—ratification of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Inclusion in the NSG will give India improved access to advanced civilian nuclear technology, allowing it concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

Formally, India remains a “non-treaty ally” of the US and continues to stand outside the alliance system that US imperialism created in the aftermath of World War II to underpin its global hegemony. But this distinction is now little more than pretense.

In tandem with its burgeoning military ties with the US, India, under the two-year-old Modi-led BJP government, has dramatically increased bilateral and trilateral strategic ties, including military exercises, with Washington's key allies in the Asia Pacific—Japan and Australia.

In the “US-India Joint Vision Statement for the Asia Pacific” issued by Obama and Modi in January 2015, India effectively announced a partnership with the US in East Asia, with Washington's anti-China “rebalance” and India's “Act East” policy proclaimed to be mutually

reinforcing. Since then, New Delhi has faithfully parroted the US line on the ever more explosive South China Sea dispute and aggressively asserted a strategic interest in the South China Sea. In mid-May, four Indian warships sailed into the South China Sea on the first leg of a two-and-a-half-month tour of the Eastern Pacific, which will include a joint exercise with the American and Japanese navies near islets (Diaoyu or Senkou) held by Japan but claimed by China.

To emphasize the bipartisan support in the US for the Indo-American alliance, Modi, who until two years ago was barred from the US due to his role in the 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom, was invited to address a joint session of the US Congress on Wednesday. He used his 45-minute address to avow the Indian bourgeoisie's readiness to serve as a satrap for US imperialism. Not surprisingly, he was greeted with repeated standing ovations.

Proclaiming America to be India's "indispensable partner," Modi said "a strong India-US partnership" can "anchor" US strategic interests "from Asia to Africa and from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific."

He lauded the "sacrifices" made by the US military, the mailed fist through which US imperialism has fought social revolution and maintained its global domination, in the "service of mankind," and painted Washington as the defender of peace and democracy against those who do not accept "international rules and norms" (one of a number of pointed anti-China references).

Modi combined kowtowing with a plea for India's own great power ambitions to be accommodated through changes to "international institutions framed with the mindset of the 20th Century."

The alliance between the venal Indian bourgeoisie and US imperialism represents a sea change in world geopolitics, with explosive implications for inter-state relations across Asia and the world.

Because newly independent India balked at US demands that it subordinate its foreign policy to Washington's Cold War machinations against the Soviet Union, the United States treated New Delhi as an adversary until the 1990s. For decades, it built up India's archrival Pakistan as its principal regional partner, encouraging Pakistan to pursue its military-strategic rivalry with India.

Now the US boasts of its plans to support India, with Obama arguing that the Indo-US alliance has the potential to be Washington's "defining partnership" in the 21st century.

India is a desperately poor country. Hundreds of millions of Indians live in absolute poverty and three-quarters of the population ekes out an existence on less than \$2 per day. But successive US administrations have coveted it as a major strategic prize.

In population, India is second only to China. It has a large and rapidly expanding military (at over \$50 billion, India's military budget is commensurate with that of France or Russia), equipped with nuclear weapons and aircraft carriers. It geographically dominates the Indian Ocean, the world's most important commercial waterway and the vital lifeline for China's economy.

In aligning with the US, India is tightening the strategic encirclement of China and bolstering

the US threat to destroy the Chinese economy by denying Beijing access to the Indian Ocean in the event of a war or war-crisis. The Indian bourgeoisie is thus boosting and encouraging Washington in its reckless drive to compel China to accept US hegemony—a drive whose logic, as the Pentagon’s own plans attest, is all-out war between nuclear-armed powers. America’s imperialist offensive has already raised tensions in the South China Sea to the boiling point.

Buoyed by US support, India is aggressively asserting its claim to be the hegemon in South Asia, demanding that its smaller rivals acknowledge its predominance and pushing back against the growth of China’s economic influence. Recently, New Delhi bullied the Maldives into declaring that it would pursue “an India-first foreign policy,” and, although this proved less successful, it imposed an economic blockade on landlocked Nepal for five months in an attempt to force it to make changes to its new constitution to give India greater leverage over Katmandu.

The US pivot to Asia and promotion of India as its junior partner is inflaming a series of interstate conflicts involving the states of South Asia, entangling them in the US-China confrontation and adding to each regional conflict an explosive new dimension.

An obvious case in point is relations between India and China, whose common border remains in dispute. But especially fraught are relations between India and Pakistan, the rival state created as a result of the communal partition of the Indian subcontinent. The two nations, both nuclear-armed, have fought three declared and numerous undeclared wars over the past seven decades.

Islamabad has issued increasingly shrill warnings that the Indo-US strategic partnership has overturned the balance of power in South Asia. But Washington, anxious to cement its anti-China alliance with New Delhi, has cavalierly ignored these warnings.

Pakistan’s response has been two-fold. It has expanded its nuclear arsenal, including developing tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons, and it has sought to strengthen its longstanding military-security ties with China—ties the US strongly supported when Beijing was allied with Washington in the last decades of the Cold War.

Beijing long sought to encourage Pakistan to seek a rapprochement with India as part of its own efforts to improve relations with New Delhi and thereby counter US efforts to make India the western pillar of its anti-China alliance. But with the Modi government spurning China’s offers for India to participate in the building of infrastructure to connect Eurasia (the New Silk Road) and instead integrating itself ever more completely into Washington’s strategic agenda, Beijing last year announced a \$46 billion investment in Pakistan to build a China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC would provide rail, road and pipeline links from Pakistan’s Arabian Sea port of Gwadar to western China, circumventing, at least to a considerable degree, US plans to blockade China by seizing the Malacca Straits and other Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints.

The Pakistani military remains a significant ally and asset of Washington. But the US, frustrated by the strength of the Afghan insurgency, angered by the CPEC, and eager to woo India, is ratcheting up pressure on Pakistan.

Last month, the US violated a longstanding Pakistani “red line” when it summarily executed via a drone strike on Pakistani territory the political leader of the Taliban, blowing up

Pakistan's efforts to draw the Taliban into peace talks. With the likely aim of bullying Pakistan into assuming still more of the burden of the AfPak war, Washington is encouraging India to expand its presence in Afghanistan, long an arena of Indo-Pakistani strategic competition.

The Indian elite has long resented Washington's refusal to give it a free hand with Pakistan and it continues to test how far Washington will allow it to go. Last year saw months of border clashes, and last weekend, India's defence minister claimed that the window is rapidly closing on Modi's highly conditional offer of peace talks with Pakistan.

Meanwhile, there are voices in US military-security circles arguing that strained US-Pakistan ties are to be welcomed as they facilitate the strengthening of the Indo-US alliance against China.

Desperate to offset the consequences of its economic decline and maintain its global dominance, US imperialism is pursuing aggression and war and in the process setting interstate relations in region after region aflame.

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