Indian government courts alliance with Israel and US

Sharon given red carpet welcome in New Delhi

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India's coalition government, which is dominated by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rolled out the red carpet for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during a three-day official visit to India earlier this month, thus further solidarizing itself with Sharon's ever-widening repression of the Palestinian people.

In pursuit of closer ties with both the Zionist state and the Bush administration, India's BJP government has repeatedly drawn a parallel between the US, Israel and India, claiming that the three are "frontline" states in the battle against "Islamic" and state-sponsored "terror." Sharon's visit concluded with the issuing of a joint Indo-Israeli statement that claimed the two countries share common goals of "advancing peace, security and stability" in Asia and defeating the "global [terrorist] threat." "[A]s victims of terrorism," declared the statement, "Israel and India are partners in the battle against this scourge ... call upon the international community to take decisive action against this global menace, and condemn states and individuals who aid and abet terrorism..."

The ink was hardly dry on this statement than Sharon's government was signalling that the next stage in its "anti-terrorism" campaign could include the assassination of PLO Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.

In addition to his Indian counterpart, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Sharon met with Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani, Finance Minister Jaswant Singh, External Affairs Minister Yeshwant Sinha, Defence Minister George Fernandes and India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra. Sharon also conferred with key figures in India's business elite at a meeting organized by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Confederation of Indian Industry. Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former Prime Minster Rajiv Gandhi, daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi and current leader of the Congress party, requested and was granted a half-hour audience with the Israeli prime minister.

Thousands of people across India took to the streets to protest Sharon's visit—the first ever by a sitting Israeli prime minister. Many held placards such as "Butcher Sharon, Go Back, Go Back," a reference to Sharon's role in the 1982 massacre of several thousand Palestinians at Lebanon's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps and his government's ongoing campaign of violence and intimidation against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The protests extended from Kashmir in the north to Madras (Chennai) in the south. Bombay police arrested a hundred people during a peaceful protest. Most of the non-Congress opposition parties issued a joint statement denouncing the visit and urging support for the protests.

The size of Sharon's entourage is indicative of the breadth of the political, military and economic ties that India and Israel have forged over the past decade. Sharon was accompanied by Deputy Prime Minster Yosef Lapid and some 150 other aides, government officials and business leaders, including the chief executives of Israeli government- and privately owned arms and military technology manufacturers. Last year alone, India spent between $500 million and $2 billion on Israeli military technology and equipment. If the latter figure, which the *New York Times* cites, is true, Israel may well have surpassed Russia as India's biggest foreign source of military equipment.

For decades a pillar of the non-aligned movement and a Cold War ally of the Soviet Union, India has long professed its staunch support for the Palestinian people. But since establishing full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992, India has become ever more closely allied with the Zionist state. In 1999, when fighting in the Kargil region of Kashmir almost led to all-out war between India and Pakistan, Israel supplied India with unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles (UAVs) and sent military specialists to Kashmir to instruct Indian troops in counterinsurgency tactics. In the name of fighting international terrorism, India and Israel have developed even more extensive military and intelligence cooperation over the past two years.

India has also become a major market for Israeli goods. In 2002, non-military trade reached $1.2 billion, a more than six-fold increase from 1992. But it is arms sales that have cemented the growing commercial and political ties. According to the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, weapons sales to India and Turkey in the 1990s were instrumental in rescuing Israel's military manufacturers from the crisis that they faced after the collapse of South Africa's apartheid regime.

In August, the US government gave Israel the go-ahead to sell three Phalcon airborne early-warning radar, command and control systems to India for an estimated $1 billion. India's plans to purchase antiballistic Arrow missiles from Israel were a major topic in Sharon's discussions with ministers of the BJP-dominated National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. Like the Phalcon purchase, the proposed $2.5 billion Arrow missile sale

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would require Washington's blessing, as it would involve the transfer of US technology.

The NDA government's pursuit of an alliance with Israel is rooted in the drive by the Indian ruling class to win India the status of South Asia's pre-eminent power and an emerging world power by currying US favor and channelling an ever greater share of India's scant resources into the military. Between 1998 and 2002, the annual increases in India's military budget were respectively: 14 percent; 21 percent; 14 percent; 21 percent; and 17 percent.

However, it also bears note that the Hindu nationalist right, which forms the backbone of the BJP, and hence the NDA, has a longstanding affinity for Zionism, stretching back to colonial times. In short, the Hindu supremacists perceive the Zionists to be fighting a common Muslim enemy.

For Pakistan, the prospect of advanced Israeli weaponry falling into Indian hands is deeply disturbing. Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf has called India's purchase of Phalcon technology a "matter of serious concern," for it will give the Indian military the ability to closely monitor Pakistan's entire air space. Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri warned that Sharon's visit, "the primary purpose" of which "seems to be the sale of ultramodern and strategic weaponry," could undermine the balance of power between South Asia's two nuclear arms states. This warning was subsequently amplified by Foreign Ministry spokesman Masood Khan. Commenting on India's plans to obtain Arrow missiles, Khan declared: "India's buying antiballistic weaponry will disrupt the strategic balance in the region. We do not know what India will do with these weapons. Where will it unleash them?"

So alarmed is the Pakistani establishment, there have been calls from within the government for Islamabad to consider pursuing its own alliance with Israel. A first step in this direction would be for Pakistan to formally recognise the Zionist state. The Musharraf regime is also said to be considering seeking airborne early warning systems from the US, thus drawing South Asia still further into a costly and ruinous race for military advantage.

Pakistan's fears are not without foundation. Sections of the Indian military—to say nothing of the Hindu chauvinist right—have urged their government to call Pakistan's nuclear "bluff," by staging cross-border raids into Pakistan-held Kashmir or even mounting a "limited," conventional war against Pakistan aimed at demonstrating once and for all Indian superiority. The Indian militarists believe that airborne early warning systems and antiballistic missiles would be pivotal to preventing or withstanding a Pakistani nuclear attack.

Furthermore, Indian officials have repeatedly spoken of a US-Indian-Israeli axis in terms that make clear that for New Delhi such an alliance would be directed, in the first instance, at maximizing India's geopolitical and military pressure on Pakistan.

India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Misra all but openly appealed for such a triple alliance in a May 2003 address to the American Jewish Committee's annual dinner. Mishra claimed that India, Israel and the US "have all been prime targets of terrorism" because they are democracies sharing "fundamental similarities," then called for "a core, consisting of democratic societies" to spearhead the "global campaign against terrorism" so as to ensure it "is pursued to its logical conclusion, and does not run out of steam, because of other preoccupations."

Making an argument that both encapsulates the Indian elite's attitude toward the grievances of the Kashmiri people and the Zionists' attitude toward the Palestinians, Mishra derided all discussion of the "root causes" of terrorism as "nonsense." An "anti-terrorist" alliance, he affirmed, should "not get bogged down in definitional and causal arguments about terrorism."

Indian-American lobby groups, long-known for their pro-BJP sympathies, subsequently joined forces with the American Jewish Committee and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to press for US government approval of the Phalcon sale. Now they are promoting the Arrow antiballistic missile sale.

There are definite limits, however, to the convergence of US, Indian and Israeli interests. To the dismay of the BJP regime, the Bush administration took the Musharraf regime under its wing in September 2001 in exchange for Pakistan's support for the invasion and occupation Afghanistan. While Washington has subsequently pressed Pakistan into curtailing its logistical and diplomatic support for the insurgency in Kashmir, it has not supported Indian government attempts to label Pakistan a "terrorist" state or allowed India to apply President Bush's "pre-emptive" war doctrine in South Asia.

India, for its part, balked at endorsing the US's illegal invasion of Iraq and has thus far spurned Washington's appeals to send troops to assist the US-British occupation force. Just as significantly, India has resisted pressure from both the Bush administration and Israel that it curtail its ties with Iran. Russia, India and Iran have collaborated in seeking to limit US influence in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

That said, the BJP regime's touting of an "anti-terrorist" alliance with the Bush administration and the Sharon regime speaks volumes about the predatory ambitions of the Indian ruling class. Moreover, whatever the future of the burgeoning military and intelligence ties between India and Israel they have already added a new, incendiary element to the geopolitics of South Asia, while sending a chilling message to India's 130 million-strong Muslim minority.

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