Australian government pursues anti-China relations with India

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A visit to India by Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith this month has resulted in initial moves to strengthen military cooperation and boost trade. These steps follow the lifting of a ban on the uranium sales to India by the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the announcement in November that northern Australia will become a key staging base for US military operations in the Indian Ocean.

Closer ties between Australia and India are inseparable from the escalating US agenda of containing China's influence throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The Gillard government's overtures to India were dictated by Washington. On November 9, in the lead-up to Barack Obama's November 16-17 visit to Australia, the US ambassador in Canberra, Jeffrey Bleich, told the *Australian Financial Review* that the ban on uranium sales was an "impediment" to relations between the India and Australia.

The US perspective is a "trilateral arrangement" that would see greater coordination and joint operations by the US, Indian and Australian navies in the eastern Indian Ocean. Australia's refusal to sell uranium to India on the grounds it was not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was an obstacle that had to go.

On November 15, the day before Obama arrived in Australia, Gillard unilaterally announced that her government would overturn Labor's platform to allow uranium sales to India. Labor's national conference at the beginning of this month endorsed Gillard's call.

Defence Minister Smith arrived in New Delhi on December 7 to begin forging the type of partnership demanded by the US. Smith met with Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony, National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon and the heads of the Indian armed forces. At a subsequent press conference, Smith, using the words of the US ambassador, said the Australian government had removed the "impediment" to relations by ending the ban on uranium sales.

Smith announced that Australia and India had agreed to expand "practical cooperation" on military issues. He stressed that "maritime security and cooperation, the South and East China Sea were part of the conversation." Against China's claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea, Smith and Indian officials echoed the US position that "freedom of navigation" had to be upheld across what is a strategically sensitive region for China. Indian oil companies are already openly challenging China's assertions of sovereignty in the South China Sea by entering into contracts to explore for oil in areas claimed by Vietnam.

In a gesture to New Delhi's great power pretensions, Smith declared that India would become "one of the world's top three powers" alongside the US and China over coming decades. He noted that India was one of only four countries that Australia had briefed prior to the announcement of the US military build-up in the country's north.

Australia, Smith stressed, considered India to be an "exceptional case" among non-NPT signatories because of the deal it had made with the United States in 2008. The US-India agreement, in open breach of the NPT, allows India to retain its nuclear weapons and military nuclear programs, and at the same time

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purchase civilian reactors, technology and uranium ore. The Labor government, Smith said, would continue to enforce a ban on uranium sales to Pakistan, India's historical rival against which it has fought three wars.

Australia holds 40 percent of the world's available reserves of high grade uranium and can now sell unlimited quantities to Indian energy companies. India's own limited reserves of uranium can therefore be dedicated to expanding the country's stockpile of nuclear weapons. While ostensibly aimed against Pakistan, India's nuclear arsenal is ever more openly intended to match China's and to assert Indian aspirations for geopolitical prominence in Asia.

The most recent nuclear-capable Indian rocket, the Agni V, was provocatively nicknamed the "China Killer" by the country's press because, with a range of 5,000 kilometres, it could hit targets in every part of China.

Smith indicated that his visit would likely be followed by increased joint exercises between the Indian and Australian navies, and trilateral exercises with the US Seventh Fleet based in Bahrain, in the Persian Gulf. He denied that a trilateral military alliance was being developed by the three countries against China. Every announcement made during his visit, however, points in that direction.

The US has a clear military strategy against China, which hinges on being able to impose a naval blockade on key sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The aim would be to cripple China's economy by cutting access to critical energy resources and raw materials from the Middle East, Africa and Australia. India and Australia, which have the largest and second largest navies respectively among Indian Ocean countries, are crucial to US planning.

Increasingly, Indian naval activity, including joint exercises with US forces, is focussed on the waters near India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are located close to the Straits of Malacca. Most Chinese imports and exports pass through the Straits of Malacca.

India's training exercises near the Straits of Malacca will complement stepped-up US and Australian operations further south. Very large ships cannot pass through the shallow Straits of Malacca and have to use the deeper Sunda Straits and Lombok Straits through the Indonesian archipelago. The northern Australian city of Darwin has been selected as a US military hub due to its proximity to these straits.

Also under study is the establishment of air bases on the Australian territories of the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island, which are even closer to the Indonesian sea passages. On the pretext of blocking refugee boats reaching the Australian mainland, the Australian military already uses surveillance bases on Christmas Island to carry out extensive monitoring of vessels across a broad sweep of the eastern Indian Ocean, including the sensitive straits.

The Gillard government is pursuing greater bilateral economic opportunities. India already purchases close to $11 billion in raw materials, agricultural products and education services from Australia. Major mining companies consider India a lucrative long-term market for coal, copper, natural gas, gold and now, uranium, and a potential alternative to Chinese markets. Large Australian government and business delegations have travelled to India in recent months.

Major diplomatic exchanges are predicted to take place in 2012 to further cement ties, including a visit to India early in the year by Gillard, and a reciprocal visit to Australia by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

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