

US vice president visits India to strengthen ties against China

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US Vice President Joe Biden ended his four-day visit to India last Thursday. The trip aimed to strengthen the US strategic relationship with India as a counterweight to China, which Washington views as the chief obstacle to its global hegemony.

Biden met with top Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the leader of the ruling Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi, the opposition Bharathiya Janatha Party's (BJP) parliamentary leader, Sushma Swaraj, as well as top corporate leaders. Biden invited Singh to visit the US in September.

Coming just a few weeks after US Secretary of State John Kerry's June visit to India, Biden's tour shows that the Obama administration is pushing to integrate India to its Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China. Washington appears frustrated that India is not playing the role the US hoped it would, and US media generally described Biden's visit as a "kick start" to a "stagnant" US-India relationship.

India has repeatedly bowed to US demands to cut Iranian oil imports and stage military drills with the Pentagon, as well as to purchase billions of dollars of US weapon systems. However, India is wary of becoming too closely aligned with US imperialism. This risks antagonising not only China, but also India's traditional ally, Russia.

Washington was particularly disturbed by India's last-minute decision in April to pull out of a trilateral military exercise with the US and Japan. Ever since the Bush administration, Washington has pushed India to join a "quadrilateral alliance" with the US, Australia and Japan against China.

During Kerry's June visit, India expressed concerns that recent US-Taliban talks over NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 could undermine forces in Kabul that the Indian government has cultivated with

billions of dollars in aid over the past decade. There are also important US-India trade disputes, especially after a group of US pharmaceutical giants protested this year that Indian drug companies were denying patent protection to US-made drugs.

Biden addressed these issues in a speech to Indian business leaders at the Bombay Stock Exchange. He declared, "It seems to me there are certain basic principles in the way forward that are clear: a trade and investment partnership that is open and fair, [and] a security partnership of first resort where we look instinctively to each other to help the Asia-Pacific region to rise."

While acknowledging US-India differences, Biden pressed for concessions: "There remains a gap between what we are doing and what we are capable of." Biden made clear that Indian business must make concessions to American capital. "Protection of intellectual property, limits on FDI [Foreign Direct Investment], inconsistent tax dues, barriers to market access, these are tough problems," he said.

India's economic position has considerably worsened since the global financial crisis began in 2008, with the rupee falling to record lows and economic growth slowing markedly. The Obama White House is well aware that India, now desperate for US and Japanese investment, is more susceptible to US pressure to join an anti-Chinese alliance.

On the question of China, Biden demanded that the Indian elite commit itself to the interests of US imperialism, calling on them to abandon "lingering doubts of a Cold War era long gone by".

Biden said the US "wants to deepen the strategic partnership on regional as well as global issues". He insisted that "India is an indispensable part of our rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific," which means being

part of a US-led web of alliances and military bases to contain China.

The Indian Ocean has been designated by the US foreign policy establishment as a centre of the global geo-strategic struggle against China. China depends on the ocean's sea lanes to transport vital energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa, including passages around the South China Sea. At the heart of the US strategy is the threat to impose a crippling naval blockade on China in the event of war or of serious political conflict.

Washington has long encouraged India, which is now a significant naval power in the Indian Ocean, to act as a police force in the region. It is also encouraging the Philippines and Vietnam to assert territorial claims against China in the South China Sea. India has become entangled in the contest for investment in Vietnamese offshore oil projects in disputed South China Sea waters, ignoring Beijing's protests.

Biden said that both India and the US have a "strong interest in maintaining the security of the sea lanes, freedom of navigation from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean". Implicitly threatening Beijing, he said that both Washington and New Delhi have to "get the relationship right with China".

Biden also emphasised a trilateral relationship with Japan against China, saying "America and India have already built a strong trilateral dialogue with Japan."

The US vice president is also exploiting rising tensions over a string of disputes and incidents along the China-India border in recent months. A standoff in April between Indian and Chinese troops was provoked by India's Congress-led government building infrastructure along the disputed border.

On July 17, India's cabinet security committee, headed by Singh himself, decided to approve a proposal to create a mountain strike force, deploying 50,000 additional troops along the China-India border. The Indian government will spend \$US11 billion over seven years on this build-up.

The *New York Times* saw the Indian-Chinese tensions as an opportunity for the US, declaring: "India has long resisted becoming too close to the American military. But recent border tensions between India and China have jangled nerves in New Delhi and made officials here strive to improve India's defence manufacturing abilities, something the United States has said it can

help achieve."

Another key issue for Washington and New Delhi is Afghanistan. Biden told Indian business leaders that Afghanistan had been "the subject of many of my discussions" with Indian political leaders. Fearing a resurgence of Islamist activity that could be directed against it, India opposes US attempts to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban after the main NATO combat forces pull out of Afghanistan in 2014.

Biden admitted there were "questions about the US position on reconciliation with the Taliban," but promised Washington would ensure that the Taliban "break with al Qaeda permanently, stop the violence, [and] accept the Afghan constitution."

Ever since President Obama was elected in 2008, the tactical reduction of the US military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq was motivated by a global strategy against China centred on the so-called Indo-Pacific theatre. Biden's visit to India has made clear that the Obama administration's agenda is to push India into playing a spearheading role to undermine Chinese influence in South Asia.



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