

Japanese defence minister's Indian visit strengthens military ties

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A four-day visit by Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera to India this week underscored moves by Tokyo to integrate New Delhi into a US-led strategic alliance against China. Amid Japan's territorial dispute and growing tensions with Beijing, Japan's government is pushing for closer military ties with India, another country with unresolved border conflicts with China.

On Monday, Onodera held talks with his Indian counterpart, A. K. Antony. According to the Indian ministry of defence, they “decided to strengthen India-Japan defence consultation and cooperation, including those related to maritime security, to further consolidate and strengthen the Strategic and Global Partnership between Japan and India.”

Antony and Onodera agreed to “continue to carry out high-level mutual visits on an annual basis” and “conduct bilateral exercises between the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force and the Indian Navy on a regular basis.” They further decided to “continue to conduct staff exchanges” and discuss exchanges of test pilots and other air force personnel. This year, Antony will visit Japan and the Indian navy will join exercises there.

These moves by Japan and India mark a further alignment of major countries within the framework of the Obama administration's US “pivot” to Asia, which is encircling China through a series of diplomatic offensives and military buildups. The US is strengthening its military bases in Asia, including in Japan and Australia, developing military and strategic partnerships in the region, and encouraging its allies, such as Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, to take more aggressive postures in their territorial disputes with China.

The two defence ministers specifically discussed the

mounting tensions between Japan and China in the East China Sea over disputed islands, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, and Beijing's unilateral declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea last November. The US and its allies Japan and South Korea responded belligerently to Beijing's move by sending combat planes through the ADIZ without giving notice to the Chinese authorities.

According to the Indian daily, the *Hindu*: “During the meeting, Mr. Antony is understood to have told Onodera that India stands for freedom of navigation in international waters and application of global conventions.” These are code words, employed by Washington, to demand unrestricted US access to waters near the Chinese coast and to intervene into China's territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas.

Japan is acting as a key player in US moves to confront China on all sides. Over the past year, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has revived a push to extend a trilateral alliance between the US, Australia and Japan into a “quadrilateral” alliance by integrating New Delhi. The real target of such a US-led alliance is China—as was made clear in an interview that Onodera gave to the Press Trust of India.

Referring to the eruption of tensions in the East China Sea, Onodera stated: “For both India and Japan, China is an important neighbouring country. Both countries have important economic linkages with China. However, after the recent Chinese provocative actions, the entire international community will have to send a message to China.”

Asked about Tokyo's earlier proposal for a trilateral grouping of India, Japan and the US to deal with challenges from China, Onodera responded: “India and

Japan have good ties with the US. Economically and internationally and in terms of military forces, these are big countries... If India, Japan and the US are in cooperation and send a common message to the Chinese side that will mean a lot.”

Washington has been forging a strategic partnership with India, aiming to use it as a counterweight to China. The US has extended several strategic and defence-related concessions to woo India. These have included signing a civil nuclear deal, which gives India access to uranium despite its nuclear weapons, and allowing exports of advanced weapon systems from the US to India. New Delhi has largely embraced the US moves as a means of pursuing its own great power ambitions, and is strengthening its ties with Japan for similar geo-strategic reasons.

With US backing, Japan has been redeveloping its military prowess and seeking to overturn the post-World War II constitutional restrictions on such a buildup. That process has rapidly accelerated under Abe. Last December, Abe’s cabinet approved Japan’s first-ever “National Security Strategy” (NSS), which calls for a more aggressive military approach. Onodera briefed Antony on the NSS during Monday’s meeting.

To enhance closer ties with India, after taking office in December 2012, Abe’s cabinet also approved a major state visit to India by Japanese Emperor Akihito, which took place last November. That visit—responding to a decade-old invitation from India—was described by the Indian and Japanese media as a highly symbolic watershed in relations between the two countries.

Like Tokyo, New Delhi has a longstanding border dispute with China, which flared up last year. Last April, there was a weeks-long standoff between the Indian and Chinese militaries along the so-called Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh region of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. India and China waged a brief border war in 1962.

Indicating its enthusiasm for closer ties with Tokyo, the Indian government has invited Abe to be the chief guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations on January 26. It will be the first visit by a Japanese premier since 2011. Speaking in New Delhi on Monday, Natsuo Yamaguchi, the leader of the New Komeito Party, a coalition partner in Abe’s government, noted: “This is for the first time that a Japanese prime minister is going to be the chief guest” at India’s Republic Day

celebrations. He declared: “I believe it will send a great epic signal ... for the strengthening of the partnership.”

Abe’s visit will mark a further step in US-backed moves to bring Japan and India closer together in order to enhance its war preparations against China. In particular, the decision to expand ties between the air forces of the two countries takes place in the immediate aftermath of the crisis generated by Beijing declaring an air defence zone in the East China Sea.

As geo-political tensions escalate in Asia, moves for stronger military ties between India and Japan, as highlighted by Onodera’s visit, greatly heighten the danger of an isolated incident or mistake becoming the starting point for a conflict that draws in the region and the world.



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