

US officials push for closer military-strategic ties with India

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31 July 2014

Top US officials are visiting India for talks with the new government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the aim of strengthening military and economic relations. US Secretary of State John Kerry arrived late yesterday to co-chair today's annual session of the US-India Strategic Dialogue with his counterpart Sushma Swaraj. US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel arrives next week.

The visits—the first by US cabinet-level officials since Modi took office—are part of Washington's efforts to boost its strategic partnership with India. The Obama administration is seeking to use the change of government following India's general election in April-May to harness New Delhi completely to its agenda. (See: After Indian elections, US to press for greater support for 'pivot to Asia')

Modi, who heads the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), is expected to visit the US in September.

While the previous Congress-led government was committed to a strategic partnership with the US, sections of the ruling elites in New Delhi and Washington were frustrated by its failure to line up completely with the US, and its attempts to maintain India's "strategic autonomy."

Speaking on Monday at the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank, Kerry endorsed Modi's pro-market economic program. Referring to the prospects for US investors, he said: "If India's government delivers on its plans to support greater space for private initiative, if it creates greater openness for capital flows, if it limits subsidies that stifle competition, if it provides strong intellectual property rights, believe me, even more American companies will come to India."

More important for the Obama administration, however, are closer military-strategic ties as part of its "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia aimed at undermining China diplomatically and economically and encircling it militarily. The US has exploited India's longstanding regional rivalry with China to push for its integration into Washington's network of alliances and partnerships against Beijing.

Now, with a mounting US confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the US wants India to line up against Moscow as well.

Testifying before the US House Foreign Affairs Committee on July 24, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal highlighted India's importance. She hailed Modi's election as "a historic opportunity for the United States and India to re-energise our relationship" and declared that India had "a vital role" to play in Obama's rebalance to Asia.

Biswal said India's "rise as a regional and global power, and its economic and strategic growth, are deeply in the US interest." Expanding on the broad sweep of the proposed relationship, she noted that "the locus of our convergent strategic interest is across the Asian landscape ... We see a partnership with India that spans east, west, north, and south to advance our shared interests across the Indo-Pacific region."

"Defence cooperation continues to play a vital role in our partnership, which Secretary Hagel's visit to India in early August will help to underscore," Biswal added. She welcomed joint naval exercises with Japan and India in the Malabar Straits that began on the same day, as "a great example of our trilateral cooperation and a manifestation of the US-India-Japan trilateral dialogue."

India has held regular bilateral military exercises with

both the US and Japan separately, but has avoided trilateral war games over the past five years so as not to be seen openly lining up against China.

Biswal expressed the hope that the Modi government would succeed in “overcoming bureaucratic hurdles and paving the way to increase defense trade and potential for co-production and co-development.” The US is looking to expand military sales to India, undercutting Russia as New Delhi’s main arms supplier.

In separate testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biswal confirmed that Washington’s promotion of India sought to counter China. “A rising India is in some ways going to be an ameliorating influence on China, in China’s own growth and China’s own behaviour in the region,” she said.

At the same Senate hearing, Amy Searight, the US deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia, highlighted India’s “Look East” policy aimed at forging closer economic and military ties with Japan and South East Asian countries, such as Vietnam. “We want to capitalise on that ... we want to support that activity,” she said. The US has been actively encouraging Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines to take more aggressive stances in their territorial disputes with China.

Congressman Steve Chabot, who chaired the House Committee hearing, complained: “New Delhi has given Russia’s aggression in Crimea implicit approval and strongly opposed sanctions on Moscow, calling Moscow’s interest in Crimea legitimate.” He asked: “Can the US trust India to be a reliable partner on significant geopolitical challenges if, for example, we can’t get India’s support on this growing crisis?” India’s “attitude on this matter with respect to Russia is very disappointing, to say the least,” he declared.

Biswal responded: “We do make the point to our Indian colleagues, as we do to friends around the world, about our perspective, particularly with respect to Russian aggression in the Ukraine, and the implications that that has.”

Clearly, the Obama administration is pressing for Indian collaboration in Washington’s intrigues and provocations, including against Russia. Through consultation on “these critical issues and challenges,” Biswal declared, “we hope that we can bring closer

together our perspectives and align efforts as much as possible.”

Lining up India against Russia will prove more difficult than against China. Throughout much of the Cold War, New Delhi was aligned with the former Soviet Union against China, which has strong ties with India’s chief regional rival, Pakistan. Sections of the Indian establishment still regard Russia as India’s “all-weather friend” and it remains India’s chief defense supplier.

Washington, however, is clearly not satisfied. It is determined to use every opportunity to undermine India’s relations with Russia as part of its overall strategy for US domination throughout the Eurasian landmass.



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