

India joins trilateral “dialogue” with US and Japan

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Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj joined her US and Japanese counterparts, John Kerry and Fumio Kishida respectively, at last week’s inaugural US-Japan-India Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue. The meeting was held in New York September 29 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

India’s participation in this new trilateral forum along with the US and its most important Asian-Pacific ally marks a new benchmark in India’s integration into the US “Pivot to Asia”—Washington’s drive to militarily-strategically isolate and encircle China.

The US has long been pressing India to join US-led trilateral and quadrilateral initiatives with Japan and its other key military partner in the region, Australia.

Later this month Japan will join “Exercise Malabar,” the annual Indo-US Indian Ocean naval exercise. When India last invited Japan to take part in the exercise in 2007, Beijing strenuously objected and by diplomatic demarche demanded that New Delhi, Tokyo, and Washington clarify whether the exercise was aimed at China.

To underline the importance of last week’s trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting, it began with a public session open to the media.

Neither the speeches made by the ministers in the public session nor the official statements issued at the meeting’s conclusion referred to China directly. However, various diplomatic code-words were employed that made clear that the “trilateral dialogue” is aimed at China.

According to a media note issued by the US State Department, the three countries “underscored the importance of international law and peaceful settlement of disputes; freedom of navigation and overflight; and unimpeded lawful commerce, including in the South China Sea.” Washington, with India’s support, has sought to cast China as the “aggressor” in the South China Sea, although it is the US that has encouraged its local allies like the Philippines and Vietnam to aggressively pursue their maritime territorial disputes with China. This includes denouncing Beijing for the land reclamation projects it is pursuing on South China

Sea islets whose sovereignty is contested, while the US tacitly backs similar projects on islets under the control of its allies.

The US State Department note added that, “The three countries agreed to work together to maintain maritime security through greater collaboration.” The US has been strongly encouraging India to develop a blue-water navy, with the aim of harnessing India to its plans to control the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Both waterways are vital to China’s foreign trade, including its energy imports, and are the focus of Pentagon plans to economically blockade China in the event of a confrontation by seizing key channels or “chokepoints.”

Swaraj, in her address to the trilateral meeting’s open session, said that the foreign ministers’ dialogue “highlights (the) increasing convergence of our strategic, political, economic, and security interests.”

She declared “the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean region” as vital to India’s “security and economic interests.” Employing language akin to that the Obama administration uses when it asserts an unfettered US right to patrol China’s coasts with its war ships and planes, Swaraj said that India has “always supported the freedom of navigation in international waters, the right of passage and overflight, unimpeded commerce and access to resources.”

Swaraj also insisted on the “strong connect between our discussions today and India’s Act East policy,” the name New Delhi gives to its drive to establish much closer economic and military-strategic ties with East and South-East Asia.

The US is supporting India’s “Act East” policy—indeed it has repeatedly said that it is ready to help New Delhi in implementing it. This is both because the US wants to strengthen India as a counterweight to China and because it wants to greatly expand New Delhi’s implication in the region and in a way that India’s ties are interwoven with those of the US.

South East Asia is also hugely important for Japan, as it plays a vital role in its production chains.

Since the beginning of the century, India's ruling elite has tilted ever more pronouncedly toward US imperialism, with which it is now allied in a "global strategic partnership."

Indo-US ties have become even closer since Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) returned to power, after a decade in opposition, in May 2014.

Setting aside the reservations of the previous Congress Party-led government, India under Modi has pressed forward with the implementation of a military co-production agreement with the US and now routinely parrots Washington's line on the South China Sea conflict.

New Delhi has also strengthened military-security ties with Japan and Australia and it has abandoned its reticence to participating in high-profile trilateral initiatives with the US and its allies. However, no doubt out of fear of riling Beijing, it continues to eschew US calls for quadrilateral (US, India, Japan and Australia) military exercises and strategic discussions.

In addition to last week's trilateral foreign ministers' meeting, India's Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar, met with his Australian counterpart and the Japanese vice foreign minister in a trilateral meeting last June.

From September 11-19, India held its first-ever joint naval games with Australia, in an exercise conducted in Indian Ocean waters near the east Indian port city of Visakhapatnam. On October 2, Indian Navy Chief Admiral R.K Dhowan began an official visit to Australia during which he will attend the annual "Sea Power Conference" organized by the Australian Navy. The conference, which will include the naval chiefs of 40 countries, is to discuss "freedom of navigation" and "maritime security" among other issues.

India started trilateral meetings with the US and Japan at the joint secretary level in December 2011 and they have been held twice a year since then. This has now been upgraded to a regular conference of the three countries' top diplomats

Also last week, Modi met with US President Barack Obama for the third time in a year. This was not a full summit—Modi was in the US to attend the UN General Assembly and to meet with US business leaders in the hopes of drumming up investment. But both the Indian Prime Minister and US President went out of their way to proclaim relations between the US and India stronger than ever before and to affirm the depth of their personal friendship.

Obama said that much of their hour-long discussion had "focused on the upcoming climate conference in Paris" and expressed his hope that India will collaborate with the US in negotiating a new international climate change protocol. New Delhi has been arguing that India should be given

special consideration in Paris since it is far less economically developed than China, let alone the US and the other western powers.

In return for New Delhi's increasing integration into the US's anti-China "pivot," Obama reiterated Washington's support for India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

During his US visit, Modi formally signed a US\$3 billion deal to purchase Boeing military helicopters. The deal cements the US's position as India's largest new arms supplier, although Russia remains India's most important military supplier under existing contracts and co-production agreements.

Earlier on September 23, Swaraj and India's Commerce and Industry Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman met with their US counterparts, John Kerry and Penny Pritzker respectively, in the inaugural meeting of the US-India "Strategic and Commercial Dialogue." The meeting announced several significant moves, including for the first-time ever joint Indo-US training of UN peacekeepers drawn from six unidentified African countries.

While currently being conducted in the name of UN peacekeeping, the joint training of foreign military forces opens the door to wider military collaboration including in mounting joint military interventions.

Indian geo-politics specialist Raja Mohan, himself a strong supporter of the Indo-US strategic partnership, was quick to note this. "It has indeed taken a long while for India and the US, two big champions of international peacekeeping to start working together," declared Mohan last week in his *Indian Express* column. "Better late than never ... Military cooperation with the major powers and neighbours is also important for another reason—not all peace operations are run from the U.N. India needs to develop military coalitions that can respond to crisis situations in the Indian Ocean and beyond on short order."



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