

India in talks to open ports, bases to US military

Wasantha Rupasinghe**16 January 2016**

According to Indian media reports, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has begun discussions with the US on a military Logistics Support Agreement (LSA). If finalized, the LSA would allow the US military to routinely use Indian ports and army and air force bases for refuelling and otherwise staging and provisioning its deployments.

Under the LSA, the US would ostensibly guarantee similar rights to the Indian military. This, however, would be largely a dead letter, for while the US is an Asian and global military power, the reach of the Indian military is restricted to the subcontinent and parts of the Indian Ocean.

Opening discussions on the LSA marks a major shift of India towards a formal military alliance with US imperialism. Already India is deeply integrated into the US “pivot” to Asia—Washington’s drive to economically and diplomatically isolate China and militarily encircle it. Now New Delhi is preparing to allow US planes and ships to use Indian facilities, bringing them in still closer range of China, India’s northern neighbour.

The US has been pressing India to sign on to the LSA since the George W. Bush administration signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2006. While the UPA held talks with the US on the LSA, it ultimately balked at signing on, because of concerns that it would imperil India’s “strategic autonomy” and rile China.

Because the throwing open of Indian facilities to the US military is a highly sensitive and contentious issue, the BJP government has made no formal announcement that it is discussing with Washington ratifying the LSA. However, the Indian government has not denied the media reports.

Quoting from an unnamed “senior (Indian) defence official involved” in the negotiations, the Chennai-based *Hindu* reported on December 26 that the LSA was discussed during Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar’s December 7-10 visit to the US.

In a statement that underscores the huge import of India agreeing to open its military facilities to the US, the *Hindu* went on to say that the official saw no serious obstacle to New Delhi soon reaching agreement with the US on the LSA. “There is only one concern,” he then declared. “What happens

in the case of war?”

The official added that India is seeking “clarifications” as to how the LSA would be applied in the event that India did not support a US military action. Saying perhaps more than he intended to about the aggressive character of US imperialism, the unnamed senior official said New Delhi did not want to be legally obliged to “extend support for war with friendly countries.”

He suggested that a “compromise” could be found through the inclusion of language stipulating that in the event of war India could determine on a case-by-case basis whether the LSA’s terms would remain unchanged, suspended or modified.

The inclusion of such language would be in keeping with India’s policy of integrating itself ever-more fully into the US’s strategic offensive against China while maintaining the pretence of Indian “strategic autonomy.”

It would help counter domestic opposition to an enhanced military-security partnership with the US. Among India’s workers and toilers there is widespread hostility to US imperialism, which they rightly identify with war and oppression. Sections of India’s political and military establishment are for their own reasons opposed to aligning more closely with Washington, both because of its impact on relations with China and because the US has a long history of bullying and threatening India.

The US, for its part, is anxious to finalize the LSA, which it views as an important piece in its long-term strategy of drawing the Indian military into ever closer ties with the Pentagon, including making it dependent on US weapons and weapon systems.

In an interview with the *Indian Express*, a Pentagon official indicated that Washington is pleased with the manner in which the negotiations are proceeding. The *Express* report paraphrased the official as saying, “Parrikar has shown an open mind on signing the LSA,” and that the US is “hopeful” two related agreements that the US views as “foundational” to developing a full military partnership with India “will follow.”

The two other “foundational agreements” are the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA).

These agreements, which are a standard part of the US' military alliances, are meant to facilitate and promote inter-military "communications interoperability" and "security."

According to the same defence official who spoke to the *Hindu*, they would involve "giving the US access to India's encrypted systems," a condition that has caused India's armed forces to voice "reservations."

A.K. Antony, the UPA government's defence minister from 2006 to 2014, ultimately came to oppose the CISMOA and BECA, as well as the LSA, because, reports the *Indian Express*, he "believed that signing the agreements would grant the US military unencumbered access to Indian military installations and compromise sensitive data."

Separately, the US is pushing, under the Indo-US Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), for India to enter into co-production and co-development projects with the Pentagon and US arms manufacturers.

However, US officials have told their Indian counterparts that if India has not agreed to the terms of the CISMOA and BECA it will "at a certain point" prove an obstacle to expanding the co-manufacture and development of high technology weapons systems.

Under the previous UPA government, India became a "global strategic partner" of the US, the Indian military became the Pentagon's most frequent partner in joint exercises, and the US displaced Russia as India's largest weapons supplier.

The BJP, during its 20 months in office, has tilted India still more pronouncedly toward Washington, including forging closer military-security ties with the US' most important Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made Obama the first US president to be the guest of honour at India's annual Republic Day celebrations. At the conclusion of Obama's January 2015 visit to Delhi, he and Modi issued a "US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean," which, to Washington's delight, included US-drafted language concerning the conflict between the US and its allies and China in the South China Sea.

In September, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and her US counterpart John Kerry announced that the US and Indian militaries will cooperate in "peacekeeping capacity building" with "a focus on training" troops from African countries for UN peacekeeping missions. While in the past there has been ad hoc cooperation between the Indian and US militaries in providing disaster relief, this agreement represents the first time they will be collaborating in an overseas military operation, working together to fashion the military forces to be used in policing and imposing by force of arms imperialist-sponsored UN peacekeeping missions.

Especially important has been the Modi government's embrace of trilateral Indo-US-Japanese military-security cooperation, something the previous UPA government drew back from after China voiced strong opposition.

Last September, Swaraj met with Kerry and Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida in the inaugural meeting of the US-Japan-India Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue. Soon after it was revealed that the annual bilateral Indo-US "Malabar" naval exercise would henceforth have a third permanent member, Japan.

Parrikar's visit was the first by an Indian defence minister to the US since 2008. During the same period, there were six visits to India by the US defence secretary, an indication of the Pentagon's push to integrate India into its provocations and war planning against China.

Symbolizing the deepening military-security ties between the two countries, Parrikar started his US tour by visiting the US Pacific Command (PACOM) in Hawaii. Led by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, he toured the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, one of the US' nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, becoming the first Indian defence minister to ever tour a US aircraft carrier.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, has issued a statement expressing concerns over the BJP's negotiations with the US over the LSA and the two related military cooperation agreements. A party that is thoroughly integrated into the Indian bourgeoisie, the CPM propped up the Congress-led UPA government for four years, including as it forged India's strategic partnership with US imperialism.

The CPM opposes the LSA, from the standpoint of the Indian ruling elite's national interests, not as part of the struggle to develop a working class-led revolutionary opposition to imperialism and imperialist war. A recent editorial in the CPM organ *People's Democracy* urged the BJP government to "not sign these agreements which will limit India's sovereignty, impair its strategic autonomy and make India a subordinate military ally of the United States."

In line with this, the CPM promotes the reactionary illusion that the Indian bourgeoisie, the UN and a "multi-polar world" can serve as a progressive counterweight to US imperialism.



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