

Indian analyst urges US to use secret diplomacy in harnessing Delhi to anti-China “pivot”

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A well-known Indian military-strategic analyst has criticised the very public manner in which Washington is pressing for India to act as a “frontline state” in its war drive against China.

Raja Mohan strongly supports India expanding military-security ties with the US. But he cautions that the US’s public pressure on New Delhi—as exemplified by a recent speech by the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris—complicates matters.

In a bellicose public address in New Delhi earlier this month, Admiral Harris called for the US and Indian navies to mount joint patrols throughout the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including in the disputed South China Sea. He also urged India to join with the US and its most important Asia-Pacific allies, Australia and Japan, in a quadrilateral “security” dialogue and proposed that this year’s trilateral Indo-US-Japanese naval exercise take place off the northeast shore of the Philippines, close to the South China Sea.

Harris’s “proposals” are aimed at further integrating India into the US “pivot to Asia”—Washington’s drive to thwart China’s “rise” by strategically isolating and encircling it and, if need be, waging war.

Since the beginning of the century, Washington has been working to harness India to its predatory strategic agenda through a combination of blandishments and bullying. This includes: a “global strategic partnership”; weapon sales and military coproduction deals aimed at making India’s military dependent on US arms; “support” and “assistance” for India becoming an Indian Ocean power and rapidly expanding economic and military-security ties with southeast Asia; and a civilian nuclear deal, which enables India to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on developing its nuclear arsenal.

Mohan is among India’s leading geopolitical strategists and one with especially close ties to western military-strategic think tanks. A former member of the Indian government’s National Security Advisory Board, he is currently the director of Carnegie India, a regional office of the US-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and a fellow of Australia’s Lowy Institute for International Policy.

Through his columns in the *Indian Express*, Mohan has been

advocating for India to develop ever-closer strategic ties with the US, Australia and Japan. While he has long favoured India pursuing “multi-alignment”—that is, closer economic and strategic ties with all the great powers—he recently argued that the heightening of tensions between the US and Russia and China means New Delhi must ready itself to make a strategic choice: “Nimble diplomacy,” wrote Mohan, may allow India for a time to “paper over the emerging cracks” in its “multi-alignment strategy,” but Delhi needs to “make some difficult judgments on where its interests might lie when push comes to shove among the great powers.”

In response to Harris’s Delhi speech, Mohan wrote a column that complained about the US’s recourse to “public diplomacy” and contrasted the efforts of India’s Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government “to advance India’s strategic cooperation with the United States” by “private diplomacy”—i.e. secret negotiations and agreements—with “an overly eager Washington” that “can’t stop talking.”

Mohan’s column praises Prime Minister Narendra Modi for breaking with the “hesitant” policy of the previous Congress Party-led coalition government and implicating India in the South China Sea dispute. “Modi,” writes Mohan, “has been forthright in affirming India’s stakes in the waters to the east of Malacca.” He lauds the “ambitious vision for strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” that Modi and US President Barack Obama signed in 2015—a document featuring US-authored language that paints China as an aggressor in the South China Sea and casts Washington as the defender of “freedom of navigation.” He also applauds the BJP government for increasing trilateral military-security and foreign policy cooperation with Washington and Tokyo, including by ignoring Beijing’s protests and inviting Japan to become a permanent partner in the annual Indo-US naval exercise, Malabar.

In his column, Mohan signals his own support for India joining the US’s highly provocative “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea, which are aimed at asserting the US’s “right” to mobilize warships off China’s coast and position itself to seize maritime choke points, so as to impose

an economic blockade on China, in the event of a war or war crisis. According to Mohan, “the question of joint (Indo-US naval) patrols gains salience every day in the South China Sea.”

But New Delhi, he warns, has become “irritated by Washington’s ceaseless public talk on joint naval patrols,” which “has excited Indian media” and “commentators in Beijing.” “America’s needless public diplomacy,” declares Mohan, “has only complicated Indian decision-making on the subject.”

Mohan’s fear is that open discussion of Washington’s plans to make India a “frontline” state in its war drive against China will expose the BJP government and the Indian ruling class as stooges and satraps of US imperialism. Successive Indian governments have integrated India into US imperialism’s global military-strategic offensive behind the backs of the population. Mohan recognizes that exposure of the Indo-US alliance and its implications will provoke mass opposition from India’s workers, youth and poor toilers. If the previous Congress-led government was, to use Mohan’s words, “hesitant” to openly align India with Washington against China, it is because of the deep-rooted hostility to imperialism, including the never-ending series of wars the US has waged in the Middle East, within broad sections of the population, especially the working class.

In his recent column on Indo-US relations, Mohan points to a second obstacle to closer strategic ties: the US’s relations with Pakistan, whose military and ruling elite have for decades served as Washington’s pawns and proxies, first in the Cold War and now in the occupation of Afghanistan and the bogus “war on terror.”

“The public warmth for Rawalpindi (i.e. the Pakistani military) in sections of Washington’s bureaucracy has become more than an irritant for the Modi government,” writes Mohan.

Although Mohan doesn’t say so in so many words, the implications are clear. The BJP government resents the fact that the Obama administration has not backed its attempt to “change the rules of the game” with Islamabad through a more muscular and provocative military and diplomatic stance, including repeated threats of cross-border raids and all-out war.

And Modi and India’s military-security establishment, or at least much of it, hope that in exchange for agreeing to joint patrols in the South China Sea and other steps that formally tie India to the US’s military-strategic offensive against China, Washington will grant New Delhi a “free hand” with Pakistan and otherwise recognize it as the regional hegemon of South Asia.

In concluding his column, Mohan warns that Washington’s “pandering to Pakistan’s military” and public airing of its strategic agenda for India “could result in squandering the moment at hand to consolidate the recent gains in the (Indo-US) strategic partnership.”

Here Mohan is making reference to Modi’s trip to the United States at the end of this month, the reports that India is on the

verge of signing an agreement that will allow the US military to use Indian ports and bases for refuelling and resupply, and plans to site US armaments production in India. The latter includes both projects to codevelop and coproduce new advanced weapons systems and to manufacture advanced versions of the F-16 fighter aircraft in India.

Both Harris’s Delhi speech and Mohan’s column underscore the extent to which India is already integrated into the US’s drive against China, especially in the South China Sea, where Washington has encouraged the Philippines, Vietnam and other states to vigorously assert their maritime territorial claims against China.

The alliance between US imperialism and the grasping, venal Indian bourgeoisie constitutes a mortal threat to the masses of South Asia and the world.

Although India is a poor country, its size, geographic dominance of the Indian Ocean, and rapidly expanding military mean that its support significantly enhances US power and is encouraging Washington in its reckless drive to subjugate China—a drive whose logic is world war.

India’s ruling elite, meanwhile, is seeking to use its alliance with Washington to pursue its own great power ambitions, especially at the expense of its nuclear-armed rival Pakistan.

With Islamabad turning to China in an attempt to counter the military-strategic advantages New Delhi is deriving from its strategic partnership with the US, the reactionary geopolitical conflict between India and Pakistan is increasingly becoming entangled with that between the US and China, adding to each of them an explosive new dimension.

The only force that can prevent a global capitalist system mired in economic crisis from plunging humanity into a conflagration that will dwarf the world wars of the last century is the international working class mobilized on a socialist-internationalist program.

Workers and youth across South Asia should participate in the International May Day rally the International Committee of the Fourth International is holding on May 1 to build a global working-class led movement against imperialism and war.



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