

Indian elite welcomes deal to allow US military to use ports and bases

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The Indian elite has warmly welcomed last week's announcement that New Delhi has agreed in principle to allowing the US military to make routine use of Indian bases and ports for resupply, repair and rest.

The only significant dissent has come from the opposition Congress Party and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. They have made the obvious point that such an agreement is tantamount to making India a formal military ally of the US, which, they argue, jeopardizes the Indian bourgeoisie's "strategic autonomy"—that is, its freedom of action.

At a joint press conference April 12, the final day of US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's latest Indian visit, he and his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, announced that New Delhi and Washington have agreed "in principle" to finalize a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA).

Such an agreement has been a major US objective for a decade or more. It is a major step toward making India a "frontline" state in US imperialism's drive to strategically isolate, encircle and if need be wage war against China.

Since coming to office in May, 2014, India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government has integrated India ever more completely into the US's anti-China "Pivot to Asia."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government have repeatedly parroted Washington's aggressive line on the South China Sea dispute, painting China as a threat to "maritime security" and "freedom of navigation" and "overflight" in East Asia. The Modi government has also upgraded bilateral and trilateral military-security ties with the US and its major allies in the Asia-Pacific, Japan and Australia. This has included making Japan a partner in the annual Indo-US naval exercise, Malabar, and initiating an Indo-US "maritime security dialogue." The BJP government has also eagerly taken up Washington's offer to co-produce and co-develop weapons systems and to coordinate India's Act East policy (its drive to develop economic and military-security ties with South-East Asia) with the US's "Pivot" or "rebalance."

India's corporate media and numerous military-strategic analysts have praised the Modi government's decision to conclude an LEMOA with the US, arguing that an enhanced military-strategic partnership with US imperialism can strengthen India's hand against Pakistan and China and help New Delhi realize its great power ambitions in South Asia, the Indian Ocean and beyond. The few reservations they have voiced are not connected with the US's

wanton disregard of international law in waging illegal wars in the Middle East and Africa or its reckless strategic offensives against nuclear-armed Russia and China. Rather they are concerned over the US's decades-long partnership with the Pakistani military and resentment over the fact that Washington will not give India a "free hand" in respect to Pakistan.

In an April 14 editorial, the *Times of India* lauded the Modi government for "rightly deciding to shift gears and engage more closely with the US on strategic and military affairs." The editorial's title, "Balancing Act: Logistics pact with US enhances rather than impairs India's strategic autonomy" was an obvious rejoinder to the criticisms of the Stalinists and Congress Party.

Taking their lead from the government, the *Times of India* editorial board tried to downplay the significance and logic of the LEMOA. It repeated Ashton Carter's claim that it "does not entail stationing US troops on Indian soil," while omitting his admission that they *could* be deployed.

Significantly, the *Times* was more forthright in identifying China as the true target of the burgeoning Indo-US military-strategic alliance. Closer partnership with the US, it argued, "is imperative for India at a time when China is already making moves to emerge as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean." It continued: "Of China's overseas trade, 65 percent passes through the Indian Ocean and preserving Indian maritime dominance in this region, especially the Malacca Straits, is crucial for sustaining India's strategic autonomy in the medium term."

The reference to the importance of the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Straits for China's foreign trade indicates the extent to which the Indian elite, entirely behind the backs of the Indian people, has fallen into line with Washington's plans to impose an economic blockade on China, by seizing key Indian Ocean chokepoints such as the Malacca Straits, in the event of a war or war crisis with China.

Indian strategic analyst C. Raja Mohan, in a piece published in the *Indian Express*, praised the government led by the Hindu supremacist BJP for having the "self-confidence to sign an apparently controversial agreement with the United States," while lamenting that it took India "more than a decade to decide 'in principle' on a fairly straightforward agreement with America."

Like the *Times of India*, Mohan drew attention to the importance of India establishing itself as an Indian Ocean power—an objective that Washington, under both George W. Bush and Obama, has repeatedly declared the US supports. The LEMOA, which

provides reciprocal rights for Indian forces to use American bases, will, said Mohan “help Indian armed forces, especially its navy, to operate far from subcontinental shores at a moment when New Delhi has to secure its widely dispersed interests in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”

Senior Congress Party leader A.K. Antony, the Defence Minister in the previous Congress-led government from 2006-2014, has termed the Modi government’s decision to sign the LEMOA “the beginning of the end of the independence of India’s foreign policy and strategic autonomy” and “a disastrous decision.”

He has warned that this agreement will gradually result in India becoming incorporated into a US-led military bloc. During his long tenure as Defence Minister, Antony was involved in prolonged negotiations with the US on a Logistics Support Agreement and ultimately terminated them, because he and important sections of the military-security establishment came to the conclusion that it would harness India to Washington’s strategic agenda. Antony is thus intimately familiar with the implications of the LEMOA and of Washington’s plans to use it to pull India into a US-led military alliance against China.

The Stalinist CPM, in a Politburo statement issued April 13 said, “The Modi government has taken the dangerous step of deepening military collaboration with the United States by agreeing to allow US armed forces to use base facilities in Indian naval and air force bases.” It added, “Unlike what the Defence Minister says, refuelling, maintenance and repair facilities for American ships and airplanes will require the stationing of US armed forces personnel on Indian soil on a regular basis.”

Pointing to Indian Defence Minister Parrikar’s indication “that two other agreements are on the anvil, Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA),” the CPM continued: “These will make the Indian armed forces command and control structure integrated with the US armed forces. In doing so, the BJP government has crossed a line which no other government has done since independence – converting India into a full-fledged military ally of the United States.”

In opposing the LEMOA, the Congress and Stalinists are voicing the concerns of sections of the Indian elite who think that too close a strategic alliance with Washington will undermine the geostrategic interests of the Indian bourgeoisie.

Their opposition has nothing to do with genuine anti-imperialism. It revolves entirely around how best to advance the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, including how to maintain political control over the working class and rural toilers among whom there is deep opposition to war and to the predatory actions of US imperialism.

While the Congress and Stalinists are now trumpeting their opposition to India becoming “a full-fledged military ally” of the US, they have both played a pivotal role in the development of ever-expanding military-security ties between New Delhi and Washington.

It was during the ten-year-long Congress-led UPA government that India consummated a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism and the US became the most important recipient of new Indian armaments contracts. The Stalinist CPM and its Left

Front helped form the UPA coalition in 2004 and provided the UPA with its parliamentary majority for a full four years. This was the very period during which the Congress negotiated the Indo-US civil nuclear accord, the agreement that cemented the emerging alliance between US imperialism and the Indian bourgeoisie.

Undoubtedly the Stalinists will now try to use the BJP government’s turn to still closer military-strategic ties with Washington to justify their attempts to politically suppress the growing social opposition to the Modi government by channelling it behind the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government.

Already the Stalinists have formed an electoral alliance with the Congress for the West Bengal state elections.

Significantly, the CPM Politburo statement opposing the LEMOA denounces it entirely from the standpoint of the national interests of the bourgeoisie, accusing the Modi government of compromising India’s “national sovereignty” and “strategic autonomy,” and on this basis seeks to rally support within the ruling class. “All political parties and patriotic citizens,” declare the Stalinists, should “oppose this surrender to the USA.”

In keeping with this reactionary stance, the Stalinists maintain a criminal silence on the war danger and the extent to which India’s support for Washington, including under the UPA whilst they were sustaining it in office, has encouraged US imperialist aggression. They do not expose how India is being integrated into the US strategic offensive and war planning against China, nor how the US provocations in the South China Sea and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific threaten to trigger a military conflict with incalculable consequences for the people of the region and the world.

Apart from the Congress and Stalinists, all other political parties in India at the national and state levels, like the AIADMK and DMK in Tamil Nadu, the TDP in Andhra Pradesh and Janata Dal (United), are silent about the BJP government’s plans to signing the LEMOA. This points to the across-the-board ruling-class support for closer strategic ties with US imperialism and a more aggressive assertion of India’s own great power ambitions.



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