

India opens talks with US on waging war on Chinese submarines

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The United States and India are stepping up their naval collaboration in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, targeting China, according to statements by military officials from both countries. This marks an important further step in US efforts to transform India into a “frontline” state in its drive to strategically encircle and prepare for war against China—what Washington euphemistically refers to as its “Pivot to Asia.”

US and Indian officials are holding talks about countering Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean, including collaborating in submarine-tracking and augmenting their anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.

An anonymous senior US official, familiar with bilateral military ties with India, told Reuters: “These types of basic engagements will be the building blocks for an enduring Navy-to-Navy relationship that we hope will grow over time into a shared ASW capability.”

An Indian naval spokesman declined to comment on the issue, as New Delhi wants to cloak its growing military ties with the US in secrecy because of fear of popular opposition.

An “Indian naval source” told Reuters that anti-submarine warfare will be the focus of the next round of joint Indo-US naval games, the Malabar exercises. The venue for those exercises, which will be staged in June, will be the northern Philippine Sea. This is near to both the South China Sea, where the US has launched provocations against China under the pretext of “freedom of navigation,” and the East China Sea, where Japan has moved to aggressively assert its claim to the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands, which were annexed by Japan after the 1894-5 Sino-Japanese War.

India recently invited Japan, the US’s most important strategic ally in Asia, to become a permanent third member of the annual Malabar exercises. The June event in the Philippine Sea will be joined by Japan, which has repeatedly deployed its navy to confront Chinese vessels in the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Building on the Indo-US “global strategic partnership” forged by its Congress Party-led predecessor, India’s two year-old Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has

dramatically expanded its military-strategic cooperation with Washington. This has included parroting the US line on the South China Sea, which portrays China as an aggressor and a threat to “freedom of the seas,” when it is the US that seeks unbridled access for its warships off the Chinese mainland. New Delhi has also significantly increased bilateral and trilateral military-strategic cooperation with the US, and Washington’s other key Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

A key strategic aim of the US, including in its pursuit of ever-more comprehensive military alliances with Japan, Australia and India, is to prepare to impose a naval blockade on China in the event of a war crisis. By seizing control of Indian and Pacific Ocean “chokepoints,” Pentagon strategists calculate they can deny China access to the Indian Ocean shipping lanes that carry the oil and other raw materials that sustain its economy.

Confronted with the possibility of being denied access to the Indian Ocean, China has moved to increase its naval presence there, including by deploying submarines. This has in turn panicked India, which views a growing role in “policing” the Indian Ocean as vital to realizing its great-power ambitions.

India, which is in the midst of a massive expansion of its navy, has moved aggressively to counter China’s growing economic interests in various Indian Ocean states. This has included, assisting the US in engineering the 2015 ouster of Sri Lanka’s President, Mahinda Rajapakse, who was deemed too close to China, and bullying the tiny Maldives to pledge that it will pursue “an India first foreign policy.”

The Indo-US naval talks come in the wake of a call from Admiral Harry Harris Jr., the head of the US Pacific Command, for joint US-Indian naval patrols across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and last month’s announcement that New Delhi and Washington have agreed “in principle” to a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). The LEMOA will give the US military access to Indian military ports and bases for resupply, repair and rest and will invariably entail the stationing of US military

personnel in India.

The US is also seeking to harness India to its predatory strategic agenda through partnerships to co-develop and co-produce advanced weapons systems, including aircraft carrier technology.

Washington is seeking to exploit Indian concerns about China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean to press New Delhi into collaboration in anti-submarine warfare. Reuters cites Indian naval officials as saying, "Chinese submarines have been sighted on an average four times every three months. Some are seen near India's Andaman and Nicobar islands that lie near the Malacca Straits, the entry to the South China Sea through which more than 80 percent of China's fuel supplies pass."

Expressing the US military establishment's satisfaction with Washington's success in enticing and cajoling India into closer military collaboration in the Asia-Pacific region, former US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jon Greenert told *Foreign Policy*: "Is this driven by China? I think so. I think clearly it is... The Indian Navy's interest in moving further east in the Indian Ocean and coming into the Pacific to exercise is an indication of that."

With US encouragement, the BJP has transformed India's "Look East" policy, an economic and strategic outreach to East and Southeast Asia, into "Act East"—that is, a more aggressive intervention into that region in pursuit of India's geo-political ambitions. Numerous US officials, from President Obama to Defense Secretary Ashton Carter have repeatedly boasted about the "convergence" between India's "Act East" policy and the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," and pledged US help in India realizing "Act East."

Nilanthi Samaranayake, a South Asia analyst at the US military's Center for Naval Analyses, noted that New Delhi is cautious not to be seen as an open ally of US against China: "India is always going to be hedging a little bit, because they don't want to be seen as antagonizing China too much." But she was quick to point to the possibilities an expanded Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean provide Washington to project Beijing as an "aggressor" and prod New Delhi into an even closer alliance. "If we actually see China be aggressive in the Indian Ocean," said Samaranayake, "that could really help crystallize Indian policy toward China, and move the relationship with the US forward."

Voicing the views of powerful sections of India's elite who want a more aggressive stance against China, G. Parthasarathy, a former High Commissioner to Pakistan, published a comment this week decrying China's close relations with Pakistan, India's historic rival, and arguing for this to "be countered by a robust relationship with China's maritime neighbours such as Vietnam, Japan and

the Philippines. Military exercises with the US, Japan, Australia and Indonesia in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean should be expanded."

For his part, the former head of Indian Navy's Eastern Command, retired Vice Admiral Anup Singh, has welcomed the growing naval partnership between the US and India. "Of course there has been a change in India's strategic vision," he told *Foreign Policy*. He added that the BJP government and the Indian military-security establishment are "all in favor of a solid handshake with the United States, because that is the only way to maintain the balance of power."

Australia is also keen to collaborate with India and the US in enhancing submarine warfare capabilities and policing the Indian Ocean. David Brewster, an Australian National University expert on the strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean, has suggested that Australia, which has just ordered 12 new submarines, may eventually join that US-led AWS collaboration. He told Reuters, "We are likely to ultimately see a division of responsibilities in the Indian Ocean between those three countries, and with the potential to also share facilities."

China has responded cautiously to the US-Indian talks on collaborating on anti-submarine warfare. Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for China's Foreign Ministry, said: "We hope that the relevant cooperation is normal, and that it can be meaningful to the peace and stability of the region."

Whatever China's hopes, US imperialism's aggressive moves for developing military ties with India, including anti-submarine warfare, will further escalate geo-political tensions across the Indo-Pacific region and the danger of an all-out war among nuclear powers.



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