

India moves to enhance strategic ties with Japan and Israel

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India has taken important steps in recent weeks to enhance its military-strategic ties with Japan and Israel, both close US allies.

These steps are aimed at aggressively pursuing the Indian elite's great power ambitions in the broader Asian and Indian Ocean regions against its main rivals, China and Pakistan. At the same time, they are part of India's ever-closer integration into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, including the development of closer bilateral and trilateral cooperation with the chief US allies in the Asia-Pacific, Japan and Australia.

Modi visited Japan on November 11-12, during which time he held talks with his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, and signed several bilateral agreements to enhance Indo-Japanese economic and military ties. Highlighting New Delhi's and Tokyo's mutual support for each other's geopolitical ambitions, the joint statement Modi and Abe issued at the conclusion of their talks said, "Abe appreciated Prime Minister Modi's active engagement in the region under (India's) 'Act East Policy'" and Modi "appreciated Japan's greater engagement in the region under" its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy." It went on to say that the two leaders had recognized the potential for "deeper bilateral cooperation and synergy" across the Indo-Pacific region.

Underscoring that China is the principal target of the burgeoning India-Japan alliance, the joint statement reiterated Abe's and Modi's position on the South China Sea dispute, which dovetails with that of Washington. The statement parroted the US claim that China is threatening "freedom of navigation and over flight." This claim is in fact a transparent pretext for asserting the Pentagon's right to maintain an armada off China's shores, so it can impose a blockade and/or implement its AirSea Battle plan in the event of a war or war crisis with China.

Modi's and Abe's decision to highlight the South

China Sea dispute is particularly provocative, as China had explicitly warned India not to involve Japan in the dispute on the eve of Modi's visit.

Modi and Abe also lined up behind the recent US provocations against North Korea, including the massive military exercise it conducted with South Korea this summer based on the scenario of a "regime change" war against Pyongyang. The statement condemned "in the strongest terms North Korea's continued development of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes." Washington has consistently used the conflict with North Korea as a means to pressure Beijing and justify military preparations against it.

The most significant development during Modi's Japan visit was the signing of a civil nuclear cooperation pact allowing India access to Japan's nuclear technology. This is the first time Japan has signed a civil nuclear agreement with a country that has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and there was significant public opposition to doing so, because of Japan's history as the only country to ever suffer nuclear attack and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster.

The potential for big profits for Japanese big business was undoubtedly a factor in the Abe government's readiness to defy domestic opposition over nuclear commerce with India. But there were also major military-strategic calculations. A similar civil nuclear deal between New Delhi and Washington in 2008 was pivotal in cementing a "global Indo-US strategic partnership." As with the 2008 deal, the Japan-India nuclear agreement will help New Delhi to further concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on the development of nuclear weapons. Last month India boasted that, with the launch of its first indigenously-built nuclear submarine, it has completed the "nuclear triad," meaning it can now launch nuclear weapons from air, land and underwater.

In an attempt to downplay concerns about nuclear

proliferation, the Abe government pointed to an addendum to the civil nuclear cooperation agreement in which New Delhi reiterated its commitment to a “voluntary moratorium” on nuclear weapons tests and Tokyo stipulated it has the “right” to terminate the agreement if India conducts a future nuclear test.

During Modi’s visit, the two countries moved to further expand their military ties. According to the joint statement, Abe and Modi “welcomed the entry into force of the two Defence Framework Agreements concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology and concerning Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information.”

India is reported to be on the verge of finalizing the purchase of 12 Japanese-built amphibious surveillance aircraft, in what would be one of Japan’s first arms deals since it removed restrictions on foreign arms sales.

In a clear indication of India’s further integration into a US-led anti-China alliance, the statement noted: “The two Prime Ministers welcomed the holding of trilateral dialogue among Japan, India and the United States, and strengthened coordination and cooperation in such areas as HA/DR [Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief], regional connectivity as well as maritime security and safety. The two Prime Ministers also welcomed continued and deepened trilateral dialogue among Japan, India and Australia.”

Two days after the conclusion of Modi’s Japanese visit, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin made a six-day visit to India. This was the first such visit by an Israeli President to India in two decades. It was publicly acknowledged that its primary purpose was to pave the way for Modi to visit Israel early in 2016, in what will be the first-ever visit by an Indian Prime Minister to that country.

While India’s previous Congress-led government pursued closer relations with Israel, Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government have made expanding New Delhi’s military-strategic and economic relationship with Tel Aviv one of their main foreign policy goals. The ideological affinity between the Hindu supremacist, anti-Muslim BJP and Israel’s Zionist right has played no small part in furthering the burgeoning Indo-Israeli alliance. The stronger relations between India and Israel have also been clearly encouraged by the US, which views them as its main ally respectively in South Asia and the Middle East.

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met Modi in New York in September 2014, he boasted that the “sky is the limit” for the relationship between the two

countries. That meeting was followed by Israel Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon’s visit to India in February 2015, the first ever such visit by an Israel Defence Minister; Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Israel later that year; and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj’s visit to Israel in early 2016.

Hailing the strengthening of Indian-Israeli ties under Modi, the Indian English-language daily *Pioneer* wrote in an editorial on November 18: “Long-held balancing acts in India-Israel relations have gone now. With the coming of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the era of India’s staid diplomatic establishment was replaced by active engagement of nations, cutting across ideological barriers of the Cold War days.”

For two decades Israel has been a major arms supplier to India. Indeed, New Delhi is the world’s largest buyer of Israeli military equipment. During his visit to India this month, the Israeli President indicated his government’s readiness to expand into the co-production of weapons. Modi subsequently said that both sides agreed on the need to make their defence ties “more broad-based” through a weapons-production and manufacturing partnership.

Israeli weapons sales to India amount to more than \$1 billion annually and include missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and weapons systems. Some Indian military analysts have expressed concerns that Tel Aviv is also selling weaponry to China and are calling for New Delhi to press for a guarantee that only India will be eligible to buy Israel’s most advanced weapons.

According to press reports, New Delhi has placed hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of rush orders with Israeli arms manufacturers in recent weeks so as to enhance its readiness to fight a war with Pakistan. For the past two months, South Asia’s nuclear-armed rivals have been involved in escalating border clashes. (See: “Death toll mounts, as India-Pakistan tensions seethe”)



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