Indian defence minister visits Bangladesh

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Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar made a two-day visit to Bangladesh, starting on November 30, to deepen military relations between the two countries. Parrikar's Dhaka visit underscores India's growing efforts—backed by Washington—to bring Bangladesh into its orbit, undercutting China's influence as geo-political tensions sharpen in Asia.

Parrikar is the first Indian minister to visit Bangladesh in the country's 45-year existence. He met with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her defence advisor Retired Major General Tariq Ahmed and President Abdul Hamid. Accompanied by India's Coast Guard chief and the vice-chiefs of the army, air force and navy, Parrikar met with military chiefs and visited a military academy in Chittagong.

The *Times of India* reported that Parrikar would discuss finalisation of "a new defence cooperation framework" with Bangladesh. Hasina is scheduled to sign the agreement during her visit to India on December 17 and 18 at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In the meeting with Hasina, Parrikar proposed new initiatives to enhance the capacity of the Bangladesh Armed Forces and further strengthen the ties between the two armed forces, according to an Indian High Commission press release. The proposals included enhanced training engagements, joint exercises, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities, and "blue economy" ventures.

Significantly, the Indian media highlighted Parrikar's visit as part of the rivalry between India and China. The news reports and articles reflect an aggressive attitude within the Indian ruling elite and government toward China.

When Parrikar's tour was announced in mid-November, the *Times of India* wrote: "To counter China, the government is rushing defence minister Manohar Parrikar to Bangladesh." The article noted that Parrikar would seek "to chalk out a major upgrade in bilateral defence cooperation in the backdrop of China continuing to expand its strategic footprint in Bangladesh."

Several media outlets noted that Parrikar's visit took place soon after China handed over two diesel-electric submarines worth $US203 million to Bangladesh navy chief Admiral Mohammad Nizamuddin Ahmed. The *Times of India* claimed the submarine handover was a "big indicator of the extensive military ties being forged between Dhaka and Beijing."

The US-based security news site *Defencenews.com* noted: "Analysts say the sale of the subs is part of a strategy meant to encircle India." An article titled, "Purchase of Chinese subs by Bangladesh, an act of provocation towards India," cited defence analyst Bharat Karnad, who said that while the submarine deal was an economic one, the Modi government "will have to ensure it does not fetch Beijing strategic benefits."

During the past several years, the US, India and Japan have increasingly pressed Hasina's government to distance itself from Beijing. Because of these pressures, Dhaka was forced to abandon the Sonadia deep-sea port project near Chittagong, which was to be built by China. Dhaka later agreed to grant another port development project to Japan.

China's leadership is vigorously seeking to develop its relations with Bangladesh. In October, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Dhaka, where he signed 27 new agreements worth a massive $27 billion.

Beijing is concerned particularly about US efforts to enlist India as a "frontline" state in its military encirclement of China. As well as deepening India's strategic partnership with the US, Modi last month visited Japan.

In Tokyo, Modi signed a defence agreement and declared joint support for "freedom of overflight and navigation" in the South China Sea. He and his

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Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, echoed Washington's line, which challenges China's territorial claims in the strategic sea. Washington is using Beijing's activities in the sea as a pretext for a military build up against China.

On his visit, Parrikar also reportedly discussed with Hasina the threat of ISIL, or Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, activities in Bangladesh. In recent years, Islamic fundamentalists who professed connections to ISIL have killed several foreigners and secular writers in Bangladesh. Some attacks have also targeted Hindu temples.

Hasina denies that foreign Islamic groups have undertaken any of these operations. However, the US and India have expressed concerns about the existence of these groups and urged her government to crack down on them. Their concern is that activities of these groups could destabilise Dhaka's relations with India and affect the strategic build up against China. This week, the Indian and Bangladesh foreign secretaries started talks on how to suppress these groups.

Hasina is anxious for support from New Delhi. Her government is discredited among Bangladesh's broad masses because of its attacks on living conditions and collaboration with foreign investors to enforce the country's super-exploitative cheap labour conditions.

Opposition parties, including the Bangladesh National Party, which boycotted the 2014 national election, are continuously challenging the government. Hasina is increasingly taking anti-democratic measures against opposition groups, including banning their activities.

To bolster her position, Hasina has backed the Modi government diplomatically. When India pulled out of the South Asian Association of Regional Corporation summit in Islamabad last month, Hasina supported it. India accused Pakistan of backing "terrorists" in an attack on its military camp at Uri in Kashmir. Dhaka also backed the Indian military's strike inside Pakistan as retaliation.

At the same time, China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner. Hasina's cash-strapped government is looking for investment from China. Under pressure from New Delhi and the US, the ruling elite in Dhaka is performing a precarious balancing act. But this will become increasingly difficult to maintain amid aggressive US military preparations against China, and India's intensifying partnership with Washington.

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