

Trump administration to expand India-US military-strategic alliance

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The Trump administration has served notice that it intends to expand the Indo-US military strategic alliance. This is not surprising, but nonetheless highly significant: first, because it underscores the new administration's intention to pursue confrontation with China; and second, because Washington's drive to harness India to its military-strategic offensive against China has dangerously destabilized the region, fueling tensions between India and both China and Pakistan.

US Secretary of Defense, General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, telephoned his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar last week. Mattis, according to the Pentagon readout of their Feb. 8 conversation, hailed the "tremendous progress" made in "recent years" in Indo-US "defense cooperation" and said the new administration is eager to "sustain the momentum" and "build upon it."

The readout made specific mention of the bilateral Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) under which the US and India are codeveloping and coproducing advanced weapon systems.

Mattis placed his call to Parrikar shortly after returning from a trip to East Asia, during which he reaffirmed Washington's longstanding strategic alliances with Japan and South Korea. He also reiterated the Obama administration's commitment to go to war with China if Beijing were ever to threaten East China Sea islets (known in Japan as the Senkaku and in China as the Diaoyu) that are currently held by Japan, but claimed by China.

Mattis's call came the day after officials in Washington had said that all the legal changes necessary to give effect to India's recent designation as a "Major (US) Defense Partner" have now been completed. As a quid pro quo for New Delhi agreeing to allow the Pentagon to use Indian military bases to service its warplanes and battleships, the Obama administration last year conferred "Major Defense Partner" status on India. This gives New Delhi access to US weapons on a par with Washington's most trusted treaty allies and Indian companies "a presumption of approval" when they seek to buy most US Commerce Department-

controlled military and "dual use" goods.

Since the turn of the 21st century, Republican and Democratic administrations alike have prioritized strengthening strategic ties with India, viewing it as critical to US efforts to contain and, if need be, thwart China's rise. India's size, large nuclear-armed military, and strategic location are all reasons India has been touted by the Pentagon, CIA, and US foreign policy think tanks as a "strategic prize." From the standpoint of the strategists of US imperialism, India is China's western underbelly. Moreover, it juts far out into the Indian Ocean, providing a prime vantage point for controlling the sea-lanes that convey much of China's oil and other natural resource imports, and almost all its exports to Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Since the Obama administration launched its "Pivot to Asia" in 2011, and especially since the Indian elite propelled Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in May 2014, India has been integrated ever more completely into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

In their parting addresses, both Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry characterized the enhanced Indo-US military-strategic ties as one of the major achievements of Obama's eight-year presidency.

Under Modi, India has been transformed into a veritable frontline state in Washington's anti-China offensive.

In addition to opening its military bases for routine US use, India—as revealed by the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, last month—is now exchanging intelligence with the US Navy on Chinese submarine and ship movements in the Indian Ocean.

New Delhi has also dramatically expanded its bilateral and trilateral military-security cooperation with America's closest Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Beginning with the January 2015 "India-US Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region," the Modi government has consistently parroted Washington's provocative position on the South China Sea dispute, painting China as the "aggressor." This stance is

encouraging the US to act ever more recklessly. The Trump administration has gone so far as to threaten to block China's access to the South China Sea islets it currently controls, an act that would be tantamount to a declaration of war.

The extent to which India is being integrated into the US war build-up against China has been further underscored by this week's announcement that the Pentagon has decided to make India a hub for servicing and repairing battleships and other vessels attached to its Seven Fleet—the force that would play the lead role in implementing the US military's Air-Sea Battle plan against China.

The ever-tighter Indo-US alliance has overturned the balance of power in the South Asian region, leading to the dangerous intensification of geopolitical tensions between India and its principal rivals, China and Pakistan. One expression of this is a nuclear and ballistic missile arms race, involving all three states.

Emboldened by the many strategic “favors” Washington has showered upon it, New Delhi has launched a campaign of diplomatic, economic and military pressure aimed at forcing Islamabad to stamp out all logistical support from Pakistan for the anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. Last fall, South Asia was plunged into its gravest war crisis in over a decade, when India mounted commando raids inside Pakistan in retaliation for an attack on an Indian military base carried out by Islamist Kashmiri separatists.

For more than four decades, India did not publicly admit to attacks inside Pakistan for fear of triggering a dynamic of escalating strikes and counterstrikes that could quickly lead to all-out war. The Modi government has dashed this policy. It has celebrated the commando raids as the throwing off of the shackles of “strategic restraint” and has vowed that it will continue to punish Pakistan until it “renounces” terrorism even if that leads to the first-ever war between nuclear-armed states.

The Modi government has been encouraged in this provocative stance by Washington. Eager to demonstrate to New Delhi the value Washington places on their strategic partnership, the Obama administration supported India's illegal and highly provocative “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan, first implicitly and then explicitly.

Even before Mattis's phone call to his Indian counterpart, Parrikar, New Delhi was calculating how it could exploit the harder line the Trump administration is expected to adopt with Pakistan, which Washington has repeatedly criticized for not doing more to stamp out Taliban safe havens inside Pakistan. In reality, if Islamabad, or at least sections of Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus, have maintained ties with some Taliban factions it is because they are hedging against the impact of the Indo-US alliance, which

has drastically increased the strategic imbalance between Pakistan and India, a country with a six times larger population and an eight times larger economy.

Pakistan's principal military-strategic response to the burgeoning Indo-US ties had been to deepen its longstanding alliance with Beijing. This in turn has further exacerbated tensions between Beijing and New Delhi.

In a statement to the Indian parliament last week, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj reiterated the Modi government's hardline policy of refusing all substantive contacts with Pakistan until it abandons any material support for the Kashmir insurgency. Swaraj proclaimed India's policy was “no dialogue, until peace” and boasted about Islamabad's growing diplomatic isolation.

Up until 2015, China adopted a cautious approach to the Indo-US military-strategic alliance, based on the calculation that a strong reaction might backfire and push New Delhi further into Washington's embrace. But over the past two years, Beijing has taken an increasingly confrontational stance, as exemplified by its decision to make the \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor a cornerstone of its One Belt, One Road initiative.

Significantly India figures large on the list of key strategic concerns Beijing has reportedly given to the Trump administration. According to Michael Pillsbury, a Trump advisor and China expert, Beijing listed six top “sensitivities”: Taiwan; the One China policy; the antiballistic missile system Washington is building in South Korea (THAAD); US arms sales to India; the Sino-Indian border dispute; and the Dali Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, which is located in India.

At Modi's invitation, the US Ambassador to India, Richard Verma, made a high-profile visit last October to Arunachal Pradesh, territory China claims as South Tibet. On a similar visit earlier last year a lower-level US diplomat said Washington considers Arunachal Pradesh an indisputable part of India.



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