

Australian prime minister visits India to boost strategic ties

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Enhanced military and strategic collaboration, clearly directed against China, was the central agenda discussed when Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made a four-day state visit to India this week.

While Turnbull and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid lip service to forging closer economic ties, Turnbull ended his trip by conceding that there was little prospect of finalising a long-delayed trade pact between the two countries. Instead, the focus was on establishing a formal strategic partnership and joint military exercises.

The outcomes were in line with the ongoing push by Washington, initiated under the Obama administration's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific to confront China, for US allies throughout the region to strengthen their military relations with each other, as well as with the Pentagon.

The visit proceeded in the shadows of the global uncertainty produced by the even more aggressive "America First" policy of the Trump administration. The illegal US missile attack on Syria and Trump's threats to strike against North Korea have heightened the dangers of war across the Asia-Pacific region, with the US targeting both Russia and China.

The trip also followed India's elevation to "frontline" status in US war plans against China by becoming a major service and repair hub for the US Seventh Fleet, under an agreement announced in February. The Seventh Fleet would play a crucial role in any US war against China, which would include blocking China's key trade routes from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.

The basing agreement marks an intensification of India's integration into US military and strategic arrangements, a drive pursued by successive US administrations since the beginning of the century. In

return for lining up against China, the Indian ruling class is seeking to assert its geo-strategic sway over the sub-continent and the Indian Ocean.

Turnbull hailed India as an "enormously important" emerging "superpower" whose strategic interests dovetail with those of Australia, which he asserted was "already a significant Indo-Pacific naval power in its own right." He declared that the two countries need "to engage our friends and partners" to "shape the entire region's common strategic outlook." Turnbull said "trilateral engagement" between Australia, India and Japan was a "good example" of this, as were "our respective bilateral engagements with the United States."

In a remarkable speech at the National Defence College, the Indian military's most prestigious officer training institution, Turnbull boasted: "We have one of the largest and most sophisticated naval forces in the region, with nearly 50 commissioned vessels and more than 14,000 personnel. And we have just embarked on Australia's largest peacetime investment in national security." His government is spending \$195 billion on new weapons systems and other military hardware over the next five years.

Turnbull went further, defining the relationship between the two countries by invoking "more than a century" of "Indian and Australian soldiers, sailors and airmen" fighting alongside each other. This harks back to World Wars I and II, in which millions of Indian soldiers were sent to defend the interests of the British Empire, and at least 150,000 died.

In response, Modi raised India's security ties with Australia to a level previously established only with Japan, another key US ally against China. The two prime ministers announced they would later this year convene their first "2+2 strategic dialogue"—a meeting

of their defence and foreign ministers.

India and Australia will also hold their first bilateral army exercises in 2018, as well as the second edition of joint maritime exercises they launched in 2015. Special forces from the two countries will also hold their second exercise later this year, following the first conducted last October.

In a press statement Modi and Turnbull “underscored the importance of respecting the maritime legal order based on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).” This was a reference to last year’s tribunal ruling that rejected China’s territorial claims over parts of the South China Sea, providing a potential pretext for US action to block China’s access to its islets in the strategic sea.

Australia’s previous Labor government backed closer strategic ties to India as part of the US “pivot,” while also seeking to open up India’s markets to exploitation by Australian-based companies. A particular signal was a decision to permit the export of uranium to India, which has a nuclear weapons stockpile but is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Turnbull and Modi expressed confidence that uranium sales would shortly commence, effectively enhancing India’s nuclear war capacity.

On the economic front, the pair held up the prospect of more Indian students enrolling in Australian universities and colleges. After coal, education is Australia’s most lucrative export to India, currently worth \$2.3 billion a year, with more than 60,000 Indian students studying in Australia last year, although this is far less than the \$5.7 billion made from Chinese students.

Despite the intensifying military ties, economic tensions were evident. When Turnbull’s predecessor Tony Abbott visited India in September 2014 and Modi toured Australia in November that year, the two governments claimed that a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement could be struck by the end of 2015.

Turnbull, however, said an agreement “may not be possible.” He blamed India’s heavy protection of its domestic economy, particularly its agricultural sector, while Modi publicly pushed for greater access to Australia for Indian workers. Turnbull lamented that Australia’s two-way trade with India was only about \$20 billion, compared to “\$150 billion-plus” with

China.

There were indications of the disarray produced by the Trump administration’s junking of the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which the Australian capitalist class had hoped would break down barriers to its penetration of Asia-Pacific markets. In an evident concession to India’s own economic aspirations, Turnbull said the “big agenda” in the region was now the Chinese-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes India.

In an effort to court Indian investors, Turnbull held a private meeting with Gautam Adani, a mining magnate whose company will soon decide whether to construct the world’s largest open-cut coalmine in central Queensland. Despite vehement support by Turnbull’s Liberal-National Coalition and Queensland’s state Labor government, the \$21 billion project has been delayed by Aboriginal land claims and legal challenges triggered by its damaging impact on the environment, including the offshore Great Barrier Reef.

Turnbull claimed India had an “enormous need for more electrification” which the Adani mine would help meet. After decades of importing coal, however, India’s domestic output has surged, making it a net exporter. And although about 300 million Indians still lack access to electricity, India’s draft national electricity plan, released last December, said there would be no need to build more coal-fired power stations until at least 2027.

Turnbull reportedly gave Adani assurances that native title law changes would clear the way for the project, and left open the possibility of meeting Adani’s demand for a concessional \$900 million government loan to finance a planned rail line to connect the mine with a port on the coast.



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