

India and Japan strengthen their anti-China “strategic partnership”

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Tokyo and New Delhi used Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s two-day visit to India last week to further cement their anti-China “strategic partnership,” laying plans for enhanced military-security cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region and for joint economic and strategic initiatives to counter Chinese influence in Africa.

Ominously, this included a pledge from India to work closely with Japan in its efforts to compel North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program under conditions where the United States—Japan’s principal strategic partner—has repeatedly threatened to launch a “preventive war” on the Korean Peninsula. Abe, moreover, is exploiting the US-provoked crisis with North Korea to speed up Japanese rearmament and eliminate the remaining constitutional restrictions on Tokyo pursuing an aggressive, militarist foreign policy.

Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi scrupulously avoided mention of China in their public pronouncements and in the lengthy statement they issued at the conclusion of their summit last Thursday. But no one was in any doubt that China was the principal motivating factor and target of their push to strengthen the Indo-Japanese alliance.

In the run-up to the summit, the Indian media was full of editorials and opinion pieces arguing that New Delhi must augment ties with Japan in response to this summer’s 73-day border dispute and war crisis with China.

Invariably such commentary emphasized that—apart from tiny Bhutan, whose territory New Delhi claimed to be defending—Japan was the only country to explicitly back India during the tense military stand-off on the Doklam Plateau.

According to the *Indian Express*, Abe raised the Doklam standoff with Modi in private and “complimented” him for “standing his ground” during the

crisis.

In their joint statement, Modi and Abe outlined plans to strengthen Indo-Japanese military-strategic cooperation across the board, emphasizing theirs is a “global” partnership. The two countries pledged to work together to “enhance defence equipment and technology cooperation in such areas as surveillance and unmanned system technologies, and defence industry cooperation.” They also agreed to explore the possibility of mounting “joint field exercises” in 2018 between the Indian Army and Japan’s Ground Self-Defence Forces.

Japan, as the statement noted, used the summit to reiterate its readiness to sell India its state-of-the-art US-2 amphibian aircraft. It had been rumoured Abe and Modi would announce they had finalized Tokyo’s largest ever foreign arms sale, but to the disappointment of many Indian and Japanese strategists the negotiations on the US-2 deal are continuing, apparently because New Delhi is angling for greater technology transfers.

Modi and Abe welcomed “the renewed momentum” for Indo-Japanese “trilateral cooperation” with the US, and Australia “stressed ...the strategic importance of these cooperative frameworks” and agreed to work for their expansion. The statement made specific mention of the annual Indo-US-Japanese Malabar naval exercise, whose most recent iteration was hailed by the Trump administration as the largest-ever Indian Ocean wargame.

Tokyo also gave strong support to India’s campaign to strategically isolate its traditional arch-rival, Pakistan. Japan pledged to work with New Delhi to combat Pakistan-based Islamist groups active in the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir and endorsed India’s demand that Islamabad “bring to justice the perpetrators of terrorist attacks including those of the November 2008 attack in Mumbai and the 2016 terrorist attack in Pathankot,” in Indian-held Kashmir.

The joint statement’s paragraph on North Korea also

included a snipe at Pakistan and an implicit attack on Beijing, with Modi and Abe urging “all parties that have supported North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs” to be held “accountable.” India has long accused Pakistan of having collaborated with North Korea in developing its own nuclear capabilities.

The People’s Republic, it need be noted, has responded to New Delhi’s integration into the US military-strategic offensive against China and the parallel burgeoning of Indo-Japanese ties by strengthening its own strategic partnership with Islamabad.

Again without naming it, the Modi-Abe statement attacked China’s Belt and Road Initiative, in which Pakistan (through the \$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor) is playing a major part. This was coupled to pledges that India and Japan will cooperate in building infrastructure to enhance connectivity between Asia and Africa and between India’s northeast and Southeast Asia. India and Japan are currently working on a \$40 billion Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, although the project has yet to be officially launched.

India’s invitation to Japan to help build infrastructure in India’s northeast—an economically backward region bordering China, Bangladesh, and Burma—underscores the strength of Indo-Japanese ties. India views its northeast as especially important and strategically vulnerable, because it is the site of myriad anti-Indian ethno-nationalist insurgencies, is at the center of its border conflict with China, and is connected to the rest of the country only by a narrow corridor.

Development of the northeast is critical to India’s plans to expand its commercial and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. Both Washington and Tokyo have repeatedly pledged to support India’s “Act East” policy as part of their attempts to implicate New Delhi evermore deeply into the South China Sea conflict. Japan is also anxious to link its existing cheap-labor production lines in the ASEAN countries with India.

Beijing’s response to the Abe-Modi summit has been muted. This is not surprising given that it is seeking to reset relations with India in the aftermath of the Doklam crisis and, more importantly, is coming under unrelenting strategic pressure from the US as it stirs up the crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

That said, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying did take exception to India’s plans to have Japan assist it in developing the northeast as India’s gateway to Southeast Asia. No “third party,” said Hua, should “meddle in the disputes between China and Indian

over territorial sovereignty in any form.”

While the forging of closer military-strategic ties topped the Modi-Abe summit agenda, Japan and India were also anxious to kick-start their commercial ties. These have waned in recent years, with Japan’s exports to India remaining stagnant and India’s exports to Japan falling from US \$6.81 billion in 2013-14 to just \$3.85 billion in 2016-17.

A highlight of the summit was a groundbreaking ceremony held in Modi’s home state of Gujarat to initiate the building of the 508-kilometer Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail project. Determined to beat out a Chinese bid to develop India’s first-ever high speed rail line, Japan is funding more than 80 percent of the project’s total cost via a 50-year, US \$17 billion loan at a concessional interest rate of 0.1 percent.

Modi and Abe also joined Suzuki Chairman Osamu Suzuki to inaugurate a new Maruti Suzuki car factory in Gujarat. To demonstrate to foreign investors that the Indian state will ruthlessly suppress any challenge to the sweatshop conditions that prevail across India, the political establishment, police and courts have jailed 13 Maruti Suzuki workers for life on frame-up charges. The 13 had led resistance to poverty wages and precarious contract-labour jobs at Maruti Suzuki’s Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant.

Both Modi and Abe are anxious to underpin the Indo-Japanese military strategic alliance with an economic partnership in which Japanese capital helps India emerge as a rival cheap-labour production-chain hub to China. A recent editorial in India’s *Economic Times* boasted that the wages of Indian workers are only one fifth of those in China and argued that maintaining this wage differential is key to realizing Modi’s plans to make India a world-force in manufacturing.

Workers must beware: the cementing of the Indo-Japanese alliance will only encourage US imperialism in its reckless and incendiary offensive against China and whet the great-power appetites of Japanese imperialism and the Indian bourgeoisie.



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