

Tillerson calls for “dramatic deepening” of Indo-US alliance

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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has called for America and India to “dramatically deepen” their military-strategic partnership.

An enhanced Indo-US alliance, Tillerson told the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), is vital to counter a rising China that “at times” flouts the “international rules-based order,” i.e., US imperialism’s dominance of East Asia and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

Tillerson spoke to the CSIS last Wednesday. He delivered a talk titled “Defining our relationship with India for the next century,” in preparation for a visit to South Asia that began in Kabul yesterday, will take him to Islamabad today, and culminate in a two-day stopover in New Delhi.

Tillerson’s call for India’s further integration into Washington’s military-strategic offensive against China came amidst a flurry of war threats by Trump and the Pentagon against North Korea, a close ally of Beijing, and as the oligarchy that has arisen in China on the basis of capitalist restoration was outlining plans to build a “great” and “strong” power, at the congress of the ruling Communist Party.

Tillerson emphasized India’s importance to Washington’s plans to thwart any challenge from Beijing and more generally to the assertion of US global power. “[T]he world—and the Indo-Pacific in particular—needs the United States and India to have a strong partnership,” declared Tillerson.

The US Secretary of State drew attention to the economic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and of the Indian Ocean, which India dominates geographically. He noted that “the world’s center of gravity is shifting to the heart of the Indo-Pacific,” with the region already the “focal point of the world’s energy and trade routes.”

While Tillerson claimed the US “seeks constructive relations with China,” he made no effort to hide the fact that the alliance the US is forging with India is aimed squarely at Beijing. He praised “rising” India for its “strategic convergence” with Washington and for its contribution, thereby, to the strengthening of “international order,” while accusing China of “rising ... less responsibly,” including by mounting “provocative actions in the South China Sea” that challenge “international laws and norms.”

After vowing the US “will not shrink from” meeting

“China’s challenges to the rules-based order” and threats to the “sovereignty of neighboring countries,” he argued that Washington is the “reliable partner” New Delhi needs in “this period of uncertainty.”

Tillerson went on to call for a US-led, quadrilateral military-strategic Indo-Pacific alliance, through the addition of Australia to several existing Indo-US-Japanese initiatives, including the annual Malabar naval exercise and the trilateral strategic dialogue of their foreign ministers, and the development of new regional “security architecture.”

New Delhi has previously resisted such appeals out of fear of a hostile reaction from both Beijing and wide swaths of the Indian population that are opposed to US imperialist aggression. However, according to media reports, India’s Bharatiya Janata Party government has signaled it is ready to move forward with quadrilateral cooperation, with only the “modalities” to be worked out.

Successive Republican and Democratic administrations have offered New Delhi strategic favors to encourage its integration into Washington’s strategic agenda, including securing it unfettered access to international trade in civilian nuclear technology and fuel and naming it a Major (US) Defense Partner, so it can purchase high-technology weapons.

Tillerson boasted about the advanced weapons systems that the US is offering India, such as Guardian UAV naval surveillance drones, while noting that Indian purchases of US arms help promote the “interoperability” of the Indian and US militaries.

Following on from recent comments by US Defense Secretary James Mattis attacking China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) infrastructure initiative, Tillerson accused Beijing of practicing “predatory economics” and advocated the US work with India and others to promote alternative “sustainable,” connectivity projects in South and South-East Asia. Later, in answer to a question posed by CSIS CEO John J. Hamre, Tillerson was even more explicit, saying Chinese investments threaten recipient countries’ national sovereignty by “saddling them with enormous levels of debt” and build projects that “don’t often create (local) jobs.”

Both Washington and India are alarmed at China’s ability to expand its economic and strategic influence through the OBOR.

The Pentagon, CSIS and other strategists for American imperialism also see it as a threat to their plans to economically strangle China by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints in the event of a war or war crisis.

In his CSIS speech, Tillerson also dealt briefly with the US war in Afghanistan and Washington's troubled relations with Pakistan, which has been supplanted as America's principal South Asian ally by its arch-rival, India.

Tillerson said he would be using his South Asia visit to implement Trump's new Afghan war strategy. Announced in August, this strategy calls for ratcheting up US violence; an "unlimited," i.e., de facto permanent, US occupation; greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan; and increased pressure on Pakistan to eliminate Taliban "safe havens," including by official threats to reduce "war coalition" support payments and unofficial threats to strip Pakistan of its "major non-NATO ally" of the US status or even label it a state sponsor of terrorism.

As Washington well knows, its encouragement of an increased Indian role in Afghanistan constitutes, in and of itself, a threat to Pakistan. Islamabad has repeatedly charged that New Delhi is providing logistical support to the Pakistani Taliban and the ethno-nationalist-separatist insurgency in its western province of Baluchistan through Afghanistan.

Emboldened by its burgeoning alliance with Washington and the souring of US-Pakistani relations, New Delhi has adopted a new hardline strategy against Pakistan. In September 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi boasted that India had thrown off the "shackles" of "strategic restraint" vis a vis Pakistan by mounting Special Forces' raids inside Pakistan. Since then, Indian and Pakistani troops have routinely engaged in cross-border artillery and gunfire barrages across the Line of Control that divides Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir, causing scores of civilian and military deaths.

Tillerson's speech, including his call for the US and India to "double down" on their "global partnership" has been welcomed by the Indian government. "He (Tillerson) brought out its various strengths and highlighted our shared commitment to a rule-based international order," said Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar. "We look forward to welcoming him in India next week for detailed discussions on further strengthening of our partnership."

Under Modi and the Hindu supremacist BJP, India has effectively been transformed into a frontline state in Washington's anti-China offensive. Since Modi and President Barack Obama issued their January 2015 "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean," India has routinely parroted Washington's provocative stance on the South China Sea. Now, as Trump threatens to unleash "fire and fury like the world has never seen" on North Korea, New Delhi has joined Washington in painting the impoverished country as a mortal threat to world peace.

Under the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement

(LEMOA), which the two countries signed in August of last year, India agreed to open its military bases for routine use by US warplanes and battleships. Earlier this month it was revealed that the LEMOA has been quietly operationalized.

Tillerson's speech to the CSIS, the favorable reception accorded it by New Delhi, and India's decision to operationalize the LEMOA all underscore that the Trump administration and Modi government view the recent border crisis between India and China as an opportunity to further cement the Indo-US alliance.

From mid-June to August 28, Indian and Chinese troops squared off against one another on the Doklam Plateau, a Himalayan ridge currently controlled by China but which is also claimed by Bhutan, a tiny kingdom India treats like a protectorate. The border dispute, which saw both India and China rush troops to the border, and otherwise make demonstrative war preparations, was the most serious since the month-long 1962 Sino-Indian border war.

Although the US maintained an official stance of neutrality on the Doklam crisis, in the midst of it Trump called Modi to urge that the US and India strengthen ties. Recent developments suggest Washington is now taking a more active interest in the Doklam dispute. On October 4, the acting US envoy to India, Mary Kay Carlson, met with Bhutanese leaders in the country's capital, Thimpu, hot on the heels of an apparent emergency visit by Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar.

India's involvement in two war crises in the past year, first with Pakistan last fall and with China this summer, must serve as a somber and salutary warning to the workers and toilers of India: the Indo-US alliance is encouraging Washington in its reckless drive for global hegemony and the Indian ruling elite in its own predatory, great-power ambitions. It must be answered through the building of a working class-led, global antiwar movement.



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