

France to sign basing deal with India, drawing Europe into drive to war in Asia

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As French President Emmanuel Macron called for a return to the draft and air strikes against Syria last week, he was also pushing to expand Europe's role in the war drive in Asia.

Under Trump, Washington has intensified its efforts to build up India as a counterweight to China in the Indian Ocean—Beijing's lifeline for Persian Gulf oil and the pivotal channel for trade in manufactured products between Europe and Asia.

France is also escalating its military relations with India and plotting to expand its role in the Indian Ocean. With Paris working with Berlin to transform the European Union into a military machine, France's strategic thrust into South Asia and the Indian Ocean region must be taken as a warning regarding the size of the European imperialist powers' appetites and the scope of the wars they are preparing behind the backs of the population.

Macron is to visit India next month. While there, he is expected to sign off on a reciprocal agreement granting French naval vessels access to Indian ports for repair and resupply and Indian vessels the right to make routine use of France's Indian Ocean military bases.

Although France's colonial empire collapsed decades ago, it retains an extensive network of strategically-located Indian Ocean military bases. Indeed, France has recently expanded this network to the Persian Gulf, cashing in on the backing Paris has provided Washington in various US-led Middle East wars.

France has bases at Djibouti on the Horn of Africa, at Réunion island near Madagascar, in the United Arab Emirates, and in Mayotte off Mozambique. France and India are also preparing to build a military base in the Seychelles.

The latter will be part of a network of Indian Ocean bases India is developing as it integrates itself evermore completely into US plans to seize Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints so as to impose an economic

blockade on China.

Indian ships now routinely patrol the Straits of Malacca and India's military exchanges intelligence with the Pentagon on Chinese ship and submarine movements in the Indian Ocean.

Under the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between New Delhi and Washington that was signed in 2016 and activated last summer, Indian and American warships and warplanes gained the right to routinely access each other's military bases. Indian ships, for example, can now anchor at the Pentagon's pivotal Indian Ocean base in Diego Garcia.

India has also set up military observation centers in the Maldives, Madagascar and Mauritius and earlier this month, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Oman, obtained rights to use that country's key Arabian Sea port, Duqm, for supplying Indian Navy vessels.

India is also expanding its naval presence into the Pacific Ocean, including the South China Sea. Toward that end, New Delhi has dramatically enhanced its military-security cooperation with Singapore, including gaining the right to service its naval vessels there.

The Indian Ocean more and more resembles a powder keg that could explode into war at any time, with competing nuclear-armed powers setting up rival networks of bases to surveil and threaten each other.

India presents the expansion of its Indian Ocean presence as defensive, given its dependence on Mideast oil and the importance of the waterway for its foreign trade. But such claims are clearly bogus.

Since the beginning of the current century, India has dramatically expanded its military might, embarking on a crash-program to build a blue water navy and developing a nuclear triad, that is the capacity to launch nuclear weapons from land, air, and underwater.

The Indian bourgeoisie see its growing military capacities as a key means of compensating, in the great

power struggle for markets, resources, and profits, for its chronic economic weakness and for securing the support of American imperialism.

India's burgeoning navy and naval base network allows New Delhi in tandem with Washington to threaten to cut off Chinese oil imports from the Middle East, bring the Chinese economy to a halt, and force Beijing to its knees.

China, the world's biggest oil importer, receives 60 percent of its oil from the Middle East and transports 80 percent of that through the Indian Ocean, as well as other raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

Beijing has responded to the moves to strategically encircle it, by advancing its One Belt-One Road (OBOR) project for trade routes on land and sea across Eurasia, financed by Beijing's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

With Pakistan, its ally and longstanding rival of India, China launched in 2015 the \$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor project (CPEC). It links western China to Gwadar, a strategically-located Pakistani port on the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. When fully operational, the CPEC will enable China to transport Middle East oil and gas to China via a land route through Pakistan, thereby diminishing the threat of a US-Indian naval blockade in the Indian Ocean and cutting 16,000 km from the distance Chinese goods must travel to the Middle East and Africa.

China has also secured a rival military basing deal in Djibouti, and it is developing deep-water ports across the Indian Ocean, including with a 99-year lease on Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka and the development of the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. It has also made major investments in the Maldives, including a development project that India claimed was in "listening distance" of its military bases.

The great-power tensions surging beneath the surface exploded into view this month, when it emerged that India might invade the Maldives to oust Chinese-backed President Abdulla Yameen. Beijing responded to reports that India's military is ready for any eventuality in the Maldives, by urging all powers to respect state sovereignty. China's state-owned *Global Times* went considerably further, declaring in an editorial, "China will not interfere in the internal affairs of the Maldives, but that does not mean Beijing will sit idly by if India breaks the principle. If India one-sidedly sends troops to the Maldives, China will take action to stop New Delhi."

Such conflicts underscore the explosive implications of Macron's decision to allow Indian forces onto French

bases and Paris' assertions that France is an Indian Ocean power. Any of a number of strategic rivalries or unresolved border conflicts in the Indian Ocean region could escalate into a global war between nuclear-armed powers including India, Pakistan, China, the United States and now France.

This also underscores the significance of the call by the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, for the publication of agreements underlying the proposed conservative/social-democratic coalition government in Berlin that would work with Macron. Amid the relentless drive to war by the major powers, workers have a right to know what war plans are being formulated to advance the strategic and commercial interests of European imperialism.

Last November, France's Ambassador to India, Alexandre Ziegler, boasted, "We have a growing cooperation in the Indian Ocean, where both India and France have focal positions, and we are in the process of forming a defence and security partnership in the Indo-Pacific."

In this context, New Delhi has in recent years built up its air force and navy with the assistance of France. France has sold India six Scorpene submarines and 36 Rafale fighter jets, which are capable of carrying and firing nuclear weapons, for a cost of about 8 billion euros. France also conducts military exercises with India such as the Varuna (Navy), Garuda (Air Force), and Shakti (Army) exercises.

The two countries have formed a High Committee on Defence Cooperation, and top-ranking defence officials from both countries meet annually.

France, India's 9th-largest investor, is putting billions of dollars in Indian armament, space, nuclear energy, railways, renewable energy and urban development projects. About 750 French companies, and 39 of the top 40 corporations in the French stock exchange, the so-called the CAC-40—including Areva, Eurocopter, Dassault, Thales, Alstom, Safrane, Renault and SolaireDirect—exploit the cheap labor available in India.



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