

Trump to promote anti-China strategic alliance in visit to India

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US President Donald Trump will be accorded an obsequious, celebratory welcome by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he begins a two-day visit today to India, the first of his presidency.

The principal aim of Trump's visit is to further strengthen the "Indo-US global strategic partnership." Under Modi's six-year rule this partnership has already expanded dramatically, transforming India into a veritable frontline state in American imperialism's reckless military-strategic offensive against China.

The visiting 12-member American delegation includes Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette, Acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney and National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien.

Modi and his ultra-right-wing, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have long been seeking to entice Trump to make a presidential visit, including with repeated requests that he be the guest of honour at the country's annual Republic Day celebrations. But they are particularly anxious to parade Trump's endorsement now when the Modi government has been rattled by mass protests against its vile communalist agenda and by a sharp economic downturn that is fuelling working class unrest.

Protests against the BJP government's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act have continued unabated for the past two months, uniting students, workers, and professionals of all religious backgrounds, castes, and ethnicities. On January 8, tens of millions joined a one-day general strike to protest the government's austerity measures and pro-investor "reforms." In Indian-held Kashmir, there is seething opposition to the BJP government's stripping of Jammu and Kashmir of its semi-autonomous constitutional status, and its brutal six-month-long military-security lockdown.

The US president will be more than happy to publicly laud Modi, whom he has previously dubbed "a great gentleman," and his government. There is a deep political affinity between the fascistic billionaire Trump and the communalist autocrat Modi. But the principal reason Trump will sing Modi's praises is that the US national security apparatus and political establishment, Democrat and Republican alike, view India as pivotal to their efforts to thwart China's "rise."

Modi will greet Trump with a mega "Namaste, Trump" event Monday at the newly-built, \$100 million Metera Cricket stadium in Ahmadabad. To shield Trump and his entourage from the site of Ahmadabad's teeming slums, Indian authorities have erected massive walls along much of the route to the stadium and carried out a wave of evictions. The "Namaste, Trump" event is meant to be the Indian complement to last September's "Howdy, Modi!" rally in Houston, Texas, where Trump joined Modi on a football stadium stage.

Reflecting the importance the US now places on India and the Indian Ocean in its strategy to counter China, the Pentagon renamed its Pacific Command the US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018. India, which now has the world's fourth largest military budget and is developing the ability to fire nuclear weapons from land, air and underwater, not only shares a lengthy disputed border with China. It is the optimal vantage point from which to control the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean, along which much of the oil that fuels China's economy travels and which serve as the principal conduit for its exports to Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Over the past two decades, the Indo-US strategic alliance has become the cornerstone of India's foreign policy. By partnering with Washington, the Indian bourgeoisie seeks to strengthen its military-strategic position under conditions where it has been vastly outstripped by China's rapid economic development; gain access to advanced US-made weapons and weapons technology; and realize its own great-power ambitions.

Encouraged by Washington's support, New Delhi has intensified pressure on arch-rival Pakistan, demanding that it cease all logistical support for the Islamist-led, anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and otherwise accept India as the regional hegemon. Twice, first in September 2016 and then one year ago this month, India mounted cross-border strikes inside Pakistan, pushing South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states perilously close to all-out war. The Trump administration publicly green lighted India's 2019 strike, announcing, after New Delhi had blamed Pakistan for a terrorist attack that killed 40 Central Reserve Border Police, that it supported India's right to "self-defence."

Beijing and Islamabad have responded to the burgeoning Indo-

US alliance by intensifying their own “all-weather” partnership. Consequently, the explosive Indo-Pakistani conflict has become enmeshed with the US-China strategic confrontation.

The Indo-US “global strategic partnership” was forged under India’s previous Congress Party-led government and enjoys strong support from both India’s political elite and big business. When Trump and his aides assert that Indo-US ties have never been closer they are not engaged in hyperbole—even if there are significant differences between New Delhi and Washington over Trump’s “America First” trade and climate change policies, and over India’s continued close relations with Russia.

Recent years have seen a pronounced enhancement of India’s strategic ties with Washington and its key traditional Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. In December, India and the US held their second “2+2 Ministerial Dialogue” with India’s Defence and External Affairs Ministers, Rajnath Singh and S. Jaishankar respectively, meeting with their US counterparts, Mark T. Esper and Mike Pompeo in Washington.

Whereas previously New Delhi eschewed joint strategic discussions with the US, Australia and Japan, for fear of angering Beijing, meetings of the so-called Quad are now a regular occurrence, with two ministerial meetings just last fall.

Since 2016 New Delhi has signed two agreements that Washington views as foundational for all its military-strategic partnerships. The first has opened India’s naval ports and air bases to US forces for routine refuel and resupply. The second, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, provides for enhanced encrypted communication and “interoperability” between Indian and US forces. Under a third “foundational agreement” now being negotiated, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA), India would be able to use US expertise in geo-spatial intelligence to enhance the military accuracy of its automated hardware systems and weapons like cruise and ballistic missiles and drones.

To reward India for aligning with Washington, including over the South China Sea dispute and North Korea, and with the parallel aim of making it dependent on the US for military technology and parts, the US has declared that it is willing to sell New Delhi weapons and weapon-systems that it only sells to its “most trusted” allies.

It is also seeking to entice India into the co-development and co-production of weapons under the Indo-US Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI).

In the run-up to Trump’s visit, India announced the conclusion of a number of arms deals with Washington. These include a \$3.5 billion deal to buy 24 MH-60R Seahawk maritime multi-role helicopters for the Indian Navy, and six AH-64E Apache attack helicopters for the Army.

For both commercial and strategic reasons, Trump is eager to boost arms sales to India, which have gone from virtually zero

to \$15 billion over the past dozen years or so. According to the *Times of India*, India is currently considering a slew of new US arms purchases, totalling billions of dollars. These include possibly buying six more P-81 long-range maritime patrol aircraft (\$1.8 billion), 30 Sea Guardian armed drones (over \$2.5 billion), and 13 big MK-45 naval gun systems for warships (\$1.02 billion).

Earlier this month, the US Defence Security Cooperation Agency announced that the US State Department has authorized a potential \$1.9 billion sale to India of an Integrated Air Defence Weapon that includes multiple types of advanced radar and missile systems.

At considerable economic and strategic cost, New Delhi has repeatedly fallen into line with Washington’s illegal and provocative campaign of “maximum pressure” against Iran. Although Iran was India’s third largest oil supplier, it quickly reduced its oil imports from Iran to zero after Trump reimposed sanctions on Iranian oil exports in November 2018. Modi rushed to extend an offer of increased Indo-US strategic collaboration in a phone call to Trump in the immediate aftermath of the January 3 US drone strike assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, which was both an act of war and a war crime.

The Trump administration has been touting US energy exports as a means for India to partially compensate for the cut-off of Iranian oil. Since 2016, India’s annual energy imports from the US have risen by almost 500 percent to nearly \$7 billion.

In the run-up to Trump’s visit, US trade officials led by Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer tried to secure a restricted trade package with India that would enable Trump to claim a victory in boosting US exports. However, both sides have lowered expectations of any major deal being announced during this week’s summit, given that differences remain over a wide range of issues, such as market access for US products and New Delhi’s demand that Washington restore India’s Generalized System of Preferences status, which provides lower tariffs on goods from low-income countries.



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