

New Delhi and Washington vow to strengthen anti-China military-strategic partnership

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24 March 2021

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin made a three-day visit to India last weekend, the first by a top official of the newly-installed Biden administration. Austin was accorded a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday, in a clear indication of the importance India's Bharatiya Janata Party government attached to his visit. On the following days, Austin had other high-level meetings, including with his Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh, and Modi's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval.

At the conclusion of the talks, both sides pledged to greatly expand bilateral military-strategic ties, which during the past seven years of BJP-rule have already resulted in India being transformed into a veritable frontline state in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

Underscoring the extent to which India's military is working with the Pentagon, Defence Minister Singh said his discussions with Austin had covered "military-to-military engagement across services, information sharing, cooperation in emerging sectors of defence, and mutual logistics support."

Austin's visit is part of a whole series of moves the Biden administration has taken to signal that it not only intends to continue the Trump administration's full-court campaign of diplomatic, economic and military-strategic pressure on China. It is determined to intensify it, with enhanced coordination with and the systematic mobilization of its allies, such as India, viewed as a pivotal component in what Biden has called "extreme competition" with Beijing.

As Austin was beginning his India visit, US officials were threatening and issuing demands to Beijing at a bilateral US-China summit of cabinet and other high-ranking officials in Alaska. The meeting degenerated into mutual mudslinging and denunciations after US diplomats provocatively denounced China for human rights violations and threatening the "rules based order," i.e., US global supremacy, during their opening remarks.

Biden personally underlined the importance his administration attaches to integrating India still more fully into Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy to isolate and encircle China by convening and hosting the first-ever heads of government meeting of the Quad earlier this month. Led by the US, the Quad is a "strategic dialogue" that involves India and

Washington's longstanding principal Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. It is enmeshed with an ever thicker web of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral ties between India and the other Quad partners.

Washington's push to expand its military-strategic partnership with India will accelerate the deterioration of relations between New Delhi and Beijing. Tensions between the world's two most populous countries exploded last year into bloody clashes over their disputed Himalayan border. The fighting in the Galwan Valley along the Line of Actual Control that separates Indian-controlled Ladakh from Chinese-held Aksai Chin resulted in the first fatalities on the disputed border in over four decades, and far and away the most serious threat of a Sino-Indian war since the two countries fought a month-long border war in 1962.

For well over seven months spilling into this year, New Delhi and Beijing were locked in a tense military stand-off involving tens of thousands of troops, tank units, and dozens of warplanes on both sides. Only in recent weeks have there been initial steps toward disengagement.

The US encouraged India to take a more hawkish posture over its border clashes with China. In a sharp contrast with its public statements when Indian and Chinese troops were involved in a border standoff on the Doklam Plateau in 2017, Washington labelled Beijing the "aggressor" and tied China's alleged incursions along its border with India to the South China Sea dispute, where Washington has incited China's neighbours to press their territorial claims.

Egged on by Washington, India carried out an aggressive military operation in late August 2020, involving thousands of troops, to seize a series of mountain peaks that Indian officials later admitted could have spiralled into all-out war.

Modi's participation in the Quad leaders' summit and the subsequent welcoming of Austin to New Delhi are a direct rebuff of the appeal Beijing made for a reset of Sino-Indian relations in conjunction with the initial steps to deescalate the tensions along their joint border. Moreover, they indicate that in pursuit of a further strengthening of its ties with Washington and its key Pacific allies, the Modi government is ready to place the de-escalation itself in jeopardy.

Austin's visit is merely the latest in a long series of steps

taken by New Delhi and Washington to develop their military-strategic partnership over recent years. During the past five years, India has signed three “foundational” agreements to facilitate cooperation and joint action with the US military—the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). In the past year, New Delhi has also signed agreements similar to the LEMOA with Japan and Australia, allowing for the mutual use of military bases for refueling and resupply. It has also expanded joint military exercises with the US and its allies, including transforming the annual Indo-US Malabar naval war games into a quadrilateral exercise.

The bilateral talks between Austin and Singh examined how the US-India partnership can be expanded to tackle joint challenges on the global arena. At the joint press conference with Austin following their talks, Singh said they had “reviewed the wide gamut of bilateral and multilateral exercises and agreed to pursue enhanced cooperation with the US Indo-Pacific Command, Central Command and Africa Command. Acknowledging that we have in place the foundational agreements, LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA, we discussed steps to be taken to realise their full potential for mutual benefit.”

In other words, India increasingly sees itself not merely as a partner of the US in Asia, the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, but also in the Middle East and Africa—regions that successive US-led wars of aggression have devastated and plundered.

In line with Washington’s encouragement of India to play a larger role in global geopolitics, it is now urging India to get involved in the Afghan “peace process”—that is, in the talks it has sponsored between the Taliban and Kabul government, with the aim of extricating the US military from a two-decade long war that has proven an immense drain on its resources. The Trump administration, in deference to Pakistan which is anxious to limit India’s influence in Afghanistan, did not include New Delhi in the Afghan peace talks.

However, Washington’s overriding priority is consolidating India as a key player in its war drive against Beijing. At his joint press conference with Singh, Austin said, “India in particular is an increasingly important partner among today’s rapidly shifting international dynamics. I reaffirmed our commitment to a comprehensive and forward looking defence partnership with India as a central pillar to our approach to the region.”

Taking more direct aim at China, Austin continued, “The relationship is a stronghold of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Prime Minister Modi has stated that India stands for freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight, unimpeded lawful commerce and adherence to international law. This is a resounding affirmation of our shared vision for regional security in the Indo-Pacific.”

This reckless agenda, which carries the very real danger of triggering a catastrophic conflagration between nuclear-armed powers, enjoys overwhelming support within India’s ruling elite. The Indian bourgeoisie is clutching to the coattails of Washington, even as US imperialism faces an historic crisis rooted in the vast erosion of its world position, so as to advance its own predatory global interests and strengthen its hand in the face of rapidly mounting opposition from the working class.

An editorial in the *Indian Express* titled “Deepening ties” emphatically welcomed Austin’s visit. It praised the Modi “government’s enthusiastic reception” of the US Defence Secretary which “underlines the urgency in both capitals to elevate the bilateral defence partnership.” It added, “Driven by shared threats from a rising China and united by a new geopolitical perspective on the Indo-Pacific, Delhi and Washington appear set to expand the scale and scope of the security partnership.” Justifying India’s closer integration into the US-led war drive against China, the editorial added, “As China’s aggressive tactics in the Great Himalayas and the Western Pacific began to strain Beijing’s ties with both Delhi and Washington, it was inevitable that India and America would tighten their defence embrace.”

Despite their ever closer military-strategic partnership, tensions between India and the US remain, especially over New Delhi’s longstanding military-strategic ties with Russia. India remains reliant on Russia for much of its weaponry and elements of its nuclear program, and hopes to use its ties with Moscow to resist becoming entirely strategically dependent on American imperialism. However, Washington is determined to limit, disrupt and ultimately break India’s strategic ties with Russia, which it considers an unacceptable impediment to the reassertion of US imperialist global hegemony.

Currently, the US is pressuring New Delhi over its purchase of Russia’s S-400 air defence missile system, which is set to be deployed to India in October. Washington has threatened to impose sanctions under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) if New Delhi goes ahead with the purchase.

When asked at his joint press conference with Singh whether he had raised the threat of CAATSA sanctions during their bilateral talks, Austin said they had discussed the S-400 purchase but that the “issue of sanctions” had not figured in their discussions because India is yet to get delivery of the missile system from Russia. Austin then added a sting to his remarks, concluding menacingly, “We certainly urge all our allies and partners to move away from Russian equipment and avoid any kind of acquisitions that would trigger sanctions.”



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