Modi’s visit to France highlights India’s military build-up amid imperialist war drive

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French President Emmanuel Macron rolled out the red carpet for Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India’s far-right Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party. He chose to feature him as guest of honour at the Bastille Day parade on Friday, July 14 where he stood alongside Macron on the Champs-Elysées amid tight security.

Modi is the political representative of India’s capitalist oligarchs, the top 1 percent which have swallowed up 45 percent of India’s wealth amid a sea of poverty and misery. He played a central role when he was chief minister of Gujarat state in instigating and aiding the 2002 anti-Muslim massacre that killed 2,000 people and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

Amnesty International released a report, “Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Guest of Honor on July 14: A Tragic Symbol”. This explained, “Many human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, political opponents, peaceful protesters, academics and students face arbitrary arrests and detentions, prosecutions without basis, illegal digital surveillance and other forms of violation of their rights including freedom of expression and assembly.”

Small protests were held in Paris amid police restrictions, with demonstrators chanting, “Not Today Mr. Modi! Bastille Day is the day of freedom”, “No to Modi’s extreme right agenda”, “No red carpet for the enemy of human rights” and “Stop discrimination against Muslims and Christians.”

But Modi’s authoritarian record only recommends him to his counterparts internationally. Indeed, on Thursday evening Macron presented him with the Legion of Honor. This follows the presentation of the US Legion of Merit to Modi in 2020 by former President Donald Trump, and the “Order of the Nile” awarded him by Egyptian butcher Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2023. Modi was also welcomed by US President Biden last month and is set to visit the United Arab Emirates.

On July 14, 1789, raising the standard of “liberty, equality, fraternity” against the tyrannical feudal rule of Louis XVI, the French revolution began with the demolition of the Bastille prison. But this year, the anniversary of the Bastille’s storming was marked following Macron’s use of police violence to quell protests that erupted across the country over the shooting death of 17-year-old Nahel by police two weeks ago. Over 100,000 police were mobilized in case of renewed protest. Macron was booed as he drove in a military vehicle and could not deliver a planned speech announcing that rioting had been brought under control for fear of igniting further protests.

Under such conditions, making Modi his guest of honour was not the “grave political error” described by Marine Tondelier, head of the French Green Party. It was a declaration of intent, meant to underscore Macron’s own anti-democratic and militarist agenda.

Amid a display of thousands of troops and a flyover involving over 90 jets and helicopters, led off by 240 Indian troops and featuring French-made Indian fighter planes alongside the Caesar anti-missile batteries Paris is providing to Ukraine, it was entirely fitting that Macron sat alongside Modi and various Ukrainian officials.

Modi’s visit highlights India’s growing military build-up amid an ongoing imperialist war drive. His government is pursuing an increasingly competitive strategy against China, encouraged by US imperialism, strengthening Indian military power in the strategically and commercially important Indian Ocean region.

In this explosive situation, Modi has negotiated several arms deals with Macron. On Thursday, the

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Modi government confirmed the purchase of 26 Rafale marine fighter jets and 3 Scorpene-class military submarines and associated support equipment, weapons, simulators and spare parts from France's Dassault and Naval Group. These aircraft will operate from Indian aircraft carriers. Modi has already purchased 36 Rafale fighter jets and six Scorpenes.

Negotiations on new cooperation and investment projects in defense sector contracts, transport, energy, and space sectors have also been held. Following this, Modi and Macron signed agreements to increase cooperation in the space sector.

France and India have signed an agreement providing for the monitoring of transit vessels and exchange of information on maritime traffic across the South Asian region. China's movements are being extensively monitored in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

French imperialism has long permanently stationed its naval units in the vast Indo-Pacific region to protect its own interests. Now, amid the widening competition for global supremacy led by the US and other NATO imperialist powers, France is expanding its strategic ties with the Modi regime to boost its presence in the Indo-Pacific and undermine the growing influence of its rivals in the region, mainly China.

In his brief statement to the press prior to their Thursday evening meeting at the Elysée Palace, Macron proclaimed, "India is a democratic and demographic power," making no mention of discrimination against non-Hindu minorities. No questions from the media were permitted.

Agreeing a "roadmap" to strengthen ties between their countries leading up to the 100th anniversary of Indian independence from Britain in 2047, Macron insisted, "India will have a decisive role for our future, it is also a strategic partner and a friendly country… We defend the same idea together of the Indo-Pacific, a space that must remain open and free of all hegemonic power."

Making an indirect reference to China following the military display, he said, "We were able to all see a marvelous image of our cooperation on sea, land and in the skies."

France has deployed more than 7,000 permanent ground troops in the region. It has bases at Djibouti on the Horn of Africa, at Réunion island near Madagascar, in the United Arab Emirates, and in Mayotte off Mozambique in the Western Indian Ocean. It also has bases in French Polynesia and New Caledonia in the South Pacific. France and India are preparing to build a military base in the Seychelles.

For its part, the Modi government continues to build new fortifications, airstrips, roads, tunnels, bridges, and rail links in the border areas, against China and Pakistan, to move troops and supplies quickly. It has increased military spending by 13 percent to 5.94 trillion rupees ($72.6 billion) in the last budget to buy new fighter jets, warships, submarines, and drones, and to expand India's nuclear power.

Macron's other main diplomatic effort, made without apparent success, was directed to persuading Modi to take his distance from the Putin regime and fall fully in line with NATO's de facto war against Russia in Ukraine, breaking with his policy of urging peace and buying Russian oil.

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