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US presses India to join anti-China alliance

By K. Ratnayake

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While visiting New Delhi this week, the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, publicly pressed India to take steps that would be tantamount to making it a “frontline state” in the US drive to strategically isolate, encircle and prepare for war against China.

Harris called for the Indian and US navies to mount joint patrols across the Indian and Pacific Oceans and for India to join the US and its two most important Asian-Pacific military allies, Japan and Australia, in a quadrilateral “security” dialogue.

Later the US admiral told a press conference that this year’s Malabar exercise, a trilateral naval exercise involving Indian, US and Japanese warships, will take place off the Philippines’s northeast coast, very close to the South China Sea.

The US has long been working to integrate India into its military-strategic offensive against China. Nevertheless, Harris’s very public call for New Delhi to join the US in what is transparently an anti-China alliance is unprecedented.

The head of the US Pacific Command outlined his proposals in an address Wednesday at the Raisina Dialogue, a newly-launched annual military-security seminar sponsored by the Indian government and the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian think-tank. Several hundred

political leaders, diplomats and military officials from more than 40 countries, including the US, Japan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, attended the Dialogue.

Harris's remarks were aimed at ratcheting up US-Chinese tensions and embittering relations between New Delhi and Beijing. In the week prior to Harris's Raisina Dialogue address, the *Global Times*, a Chinese government newspaper, twice ran articles expressing concern about news reports that the US has invited India to mount joint naval patrols including in the South China Sea. In 2007, when the possibility of a "quadrilateral dialogue" involving the US, Japan, Australia and India was first publicly floated, Beijing vehemently objected in official protests to all four governments.

Although the Pentagon only made it public yesterday, the US Navy, acting under Harris's command, has deployed an aircraft-carrier led strike force in the South China Sea since last Tuesday. This is part of Washington's ongoing efforts to stoke tensions in the region by encouraging the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states to aggressively pursue their maritime territorial claims against China, including by providing them with arms and "security guarantees."

In his Raisina address, Harris emphasized the importance the Pentagon attaches to harnessing India—a nuclear power with a growing blue-water navy and Asia's third largest economy—to its war plans.

He claimed to be "a bit moonstruck ... by the opportunities a strategic partnership with India represents." Combining cold-blooded calculation with flattery, he told his Indian hosts that expanded Indo-US cooperation "will not only be the defining partnership for the Rebalance [Washington's preferred name for the anti-China 'Pivot']. It will arguably be the defining partnership for America in the 21st Century."

Washington has long been encouraging India to take a larger role in assisting the US in policing the Indian Ocean, which has displaced the North Atlantic as the world's most important trade route and whose sea lanes carry much of the oil and other resources that fuel China's economy.

The head of the US Pacific Command said he envisioned that "in the not too distant future," it will "become a common sight ... throughout Indo-Asia-Pacific waters" to see "American and Indian Navy vessels steaming together."

He also suggested India should mount similar joint patrols with the US's closest allies. "By being ambitious," declared Harris, "India, Japan, Australia, the United States and so many other like-minded nations can aspire to patrol together anywhere international law allows."

The US admiral tried to dress up this bellicose proposal as defense of "freedom of navigation." In reality, what concerns the Pentagon is upholding the US military's "right" to patrol China's coastal waters and to position itself to rapidly seize hold of key Indian Ocean "choke-points" in the event of a war crisis so as to impose an economic blockade on China.

Continuing in the same vein, Harris urged the US be invited to join the “Trilateral Dialogue” that India, Japan and Australia launched last June. “Adding the US into this dialogue,” said Harris, “can amplify the message that we are united behind the international rules-based order that has kept the peace and is essential to all of US.”

Of course, when the US imperialist spokesmen speak of an “international rules-based order” they mean a US-led world order.

Harris made a pro forma claim that his proposals for closer US-Indian collaboration were directed against “no nation.” But apart from studiously avoiding mentioning the word China, he made no effort to disguise that Washington’s aim is to make India the southwestern pillar of an anti-China military bloc.

The admiral made repeated blatant and provocative references to China and the South China Sea dispute. He claimed “some countries seek to bully smaller nations through intimidation and coercion.” Later he contrasted India, which he said “stands like a beacon on a hill in a potential Dark Age,” with those building “castles of sand [a reference to Beijing’s South China Sea island reclamation projects] that threaten the rules-based architecture that has served us so very well.”

Harris touted India as a country committed to the “peaceful resolution of disputes.” In fact India, now led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and buoyed by Washington’s support, is aggressively seeking to impose itself as South Asia’s regional hegemon. From late September to last month New Delhi imposed a five-month long economic blockade on Nepal, causing great hardship in that landlocked country. It has repeatedly threatened Pakistan with military action and it assisted the US in a “regime change” operation in Sri Lanka so as to bring to power a government that has distanced Colombo from Beijing.

In 2006, as the US was waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Indian bourgeoisie entered into a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism, leading to a rapid burgeoning of military-security ties.

Under Narendra Modi’s BJP government, which came to power in May 2014, New Delhi has increasingly integrated itself into the US’s strategic offensive against China. This has included rapidly expanding military-security collaboration with Japan and Australia as well as the US. Last October, Japan became a permanent participant in the Indo-US Malabar naval exercise. In addition to forming a trilateral military-security dialogue with Australia and Japan, India launched regular trilateral meetings last September with the US and Japan at the foreign minister level.

Also, beginning with the statement outlining a “Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean” that Modi and US President Obama issued in January 2015, New Delhi has repeatedly employed US-authored language when referring to the South China Sea dispute.

Indian government officials did not immediately respond to Harris’s provocative remarks.

Quite possibly they were taken aback by his readiness to publicly discuss proposals that had been raised in private—proposals they well know will be opposed by wide swathes of the population who rightly oppose India becoming a satrap for US imperialism.

Only on Friday did Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar rebuff the suggestion that India will mount joint navy patrols with the US and he did so in such a way that he very much left the door open to such a possibility in the future,

“Our viewpoint will come,” said Parrikar, “if at all we consider it [Harris’s proposal]. As of now, India has never taken part in any joint patrol; the question of joint patrol does not arise.”

Indian and US officials are currently in intense negotiations over three agreements the Pentagon considers “foundational” in developing closer collaboration with the Indian military. The first, the Logistics Support Agreement, would grant the US military routine access to Indian port facilities and military bases as well as regularizing payments for fuel and other supplies. The others are aimed at fostering interoperability between US and Indian military forces and concern secure communications and the exchange of topographical, nautical and aeronautical data.

Speaking to the US Senate Armed Services Committee last week, Harris said the agreements had yet to be signed, but are “close” to being finalized.

Underscoring the significance of what is involved, an Indian official involved in the talks was quoted last December as saying the only hitch in giving the US access to Indian bases was “What happens in the case of war?”