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India-US military cooperation “robust and deepening”

By K. Ratnayake
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US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, announced Tuesday that Washington and New Delhi have “agreed in principle” on a “logistics exchange agreement” under which the US military will be able to routinely use Indian bases and ports for resupply, repair, and rest.

A longstanding US objective, the “logistics agreement” has far reaching military and strategic implications for India and the world. Behind the backs of the Indian people, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and the Indian military-security establishment are transforming India into a “frontline state” in Washington’s drive to strategically encircle, subjugate, and if need be wage war on China.

A joint Indo-US statement summarizing the outcome of Carter’s three-day visit to India lauded the “robust and deepening bilateral” military-security ties between the two countries.

Carter began his visit at the Karavar naval base near Goa on India’s west coast. There he joined Parrikar in a joint inspection of the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya and the US Pacific fleet’s USS Blue Ridge warship, which was making a “routine call.” The US and Indian Defense Secretaries then flew to New Delhi for further talks and a meeting between Carter and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

At his Tuesday press conference with Carter, Parrikar said that the expansion of Indo-US military ties meant new “practical mechanisms” were needed. The two, Parrikar said, had agreed to finalize a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) “in the coming months,” with a draft agreement to be “ready in a month, if not weeks.”

Carter, Parrikar, and their officials were anxious to downplay and distort the significance of the LEMOA. This is because they recognize that there is no support among India’s workers and toilers for harnessing India to US imperialism’s predatory strategic agenda.

Indian officials said the LEMOA will differ from the Logistics Support Agreements (LSA) that the Pentagon has with other countries. They claimed it will operate on a case-by-case basis, with India always having the right to refuse a US request for assistance, and that if Washington were to go to war, India would be under no obligation to allow the US military to continue using its bases for refuelling and other logistical support.

For his part, Carter emphasized that the agreement is not about basing US troops in India, but about making “it more routine and automatic for us to operate together,” including in paying for supplies. Significantly, Carter did suggest that US troops could be deployed in India, but only for a specific mission—a mission that he was careful to cast as humanitarian.

“Nobody,” said the US Defense Secretary, “is talking of stationing troops on Indian soil. As and when a situation arises, like an earthquake or natural disaster, that is when it is directed at. It will be applicable on a case-to-case basis but under the agreement.”

To understand the true import of LEMOA it is necessary to situate it within the broader context of the rapid expansion of Indian-US military-strategic ties and New Delhi’s support for the aggressive stance the US has adopted in the South China Sea.

The joint statement issued by Carter and Parrikar, “reaffirmed the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the (Indo-Pacific) region, including in the South China Sea.” It went on to say that the Defense Secretaries had “vowed their support for a rule-based order and regional security conducive to peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean.”

All of this parrots Washington’s line. It depicts China as the aggressor, when it is the US that has encouraged China’s neighbours to press their maritime claims against Beijing, and portrays the US as motivated by concern for ensuring that sea lanes remain open for trade, when its real aim is to ensure its warships have ready access to China’s coastal waters and control over the sea lanes upon which its economy depends.

Washington has been anxious to implicate India its strategic competition with China in south-east Asia and the South China Sea and to encourage India in its ambitions to become an Indian Ocean power. The LEMOA would actually facilitate this, as, under its reciprocal provisions, Indian war ships will be able to make use of US bases at Diego Garcia, Bahrain, and elsewhere for resupply.

During his India trip, Carter reiterated Washington's offer to assist India in developing economic and military-strategic ties with South-East Asia and touted the "strategic convergence" between the US's anti-China "Pivot to Asia" and India's "Act East" policy.

Carter also proclaimed the US's support for India's plans to expand its fleet of warships from 130 to 166, including the addition of a third aircraft carrier, saying Washington believes that India should be a "net exporter of security" to the region.

As a result of Carter's visit, India and the US have now agreed to launch a bilateral Maritime Security Dialogue led by high-level Defense and foreign affairs officials; to commence navy-to-navy discussions on anti-submarine warfare; and continue talks on a joint aircraft-carrier design project and the transfer to India of US catapult take-off aircraft-carrier technology.

India's previous Congress Party-led government abandoned in all but name India's traditional posture of non-alignment, forging a "global strategic partnership" with Washington. During its decade in power from 2004-14, the Indian military became the Pentagon's most frequent partner in military exercises and the US emerged as a major weapons supplier to New Delhi—the biggest in terms of new weapons deals.

However, Washington became increasingly impatient with New Delhi's reputed "strategic dithering," especially after it launched the "pivot" or "rebalance" in 2011. Since coming to power in 2014, Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP have moved aggressively to integrate India ever-more deeply into the US's military-strategic offensive against China in the hopes of bolstering India's own great power ambitions and boosting investment from the US and Japan.

This has included: signing on to a "US-India Joint Strategic Vision Agreement for Asia Pacific Region and Indian Ocean" that includes US-scripted language on the South China Sea; assisting the US in its "regime change" operation in the 2015 Sri Lankan presidential election; making Japan a partner of the annual US-Indian Malabar naval exercise; and otherwise expanding bilateral and trilateral with the US's principal allies in the region, Japan and Australia.

The Modi government has also pressed forward with the implementation of a US-Indo "Defense Technology and Trade Initiative," although not as fast as Washington would like. Through deals to co-produce and co-develop advanced weapon systems, the Pentagon and Obama administration are trying to secure huge arms contracts for US big business. Even more importantly, they are seeking to harness the Indian military to the US, by making it dependent on US technology and support.

During his India trip, Carter promoted deals to both sell and produce in India the Lockheed Martin-made F-16 fighter jet and Boeing's F/A 18, an aircraft designed to be launched from an aircraft carrier using catapult technology.

At his press conference, Carter was asked how India could trust Washington when it is selling F-16s to India's arch-rival Pakistan. In his response, the US Defense Secretary insisted that while Islamabad is an important ally of Washington in fighting "terrorism," i.e. waging war in

Afghanistan, the US views its relations with India radically differently. India is a global US partner, claimed Carter.

Pakistan has repeatedly warned that the US's strategic partnership with India has overturned the balance of power between two nuclear-armed South Asian states. On Tuesday, as Carter was wrapping up his India trip, the head of Pakistan's military, General Raheel Sharif, accused India of covertly aiding the separatist insurgency in Baluchistan so as to prevent the realization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

China's initial response to the impending India-US logistics support agreement and Carter's visit has been cautious. A Foreign Ministry official merely noted that "India has been upholding (an) independent diplomatic policy" and added that Parrikar will soon be visiting China. Some press reports suggested this was a veiled way of saying Beijing intends to use Parrikar's visit to make its apprehensions known.

India's big business media has been very supportive of the Modi government's pronounced pro-US shift in India's foreign policy. "India bases to open door to US warships, planes" trumpeted the headline of a laudatory report in the *Times of India*. In an editorial published on the eve of Carter's visit the *Business Standard* declared, "Though it is true that the US sees India as one bulwark against China's rising power, reciprocity here can only be mutually beneficial in the light of China's overt tilt towards Pakistan and aggressive infrastructure expansion into India's neighbourhood."