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Trump and Modi trumpet Indo-US “strategic convergence”

By Deepal Jayasekera

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US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged to strengthen the Indo-US “global strategic partnership” when they met at the White House Monday for their first bilateral meeting.

Modi, an arch-communist and faithful errand boy for big business, and Trump, the billionaire autocrat, lavished praise on one another, while emphasizing the “strategic convergence” between the US and India.

Under Modi’s three year-old Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, India is increasingly serving as a frontline state in US imperialism’s military-strategic offensive against China. India has dramatically expanded bilateral and trilateral military-strategic ties with Washington and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia, and has thrown open its military bases to US warplanes and battleships for routine resupply and repair.

At a joint press conference and in the statement they issued summarizing their talks, Trump and Modi vowed to “expand and deepen” the Indo-US alliance, with Modi endorsing Washington’s provocative stance on North Korea and the South China Sea dispute, and Trump extending several strategic “favours” to India.

“The relationship between India and the United States has never been stronger, has never been better,” Trump told the press conference. Characterizing the “security partnership between the United States and India” as “incredibly important,” the US President added: “Our militaries are working every day to enhance cooperation between our military forces. And next month, they will join together with the Japanese navy to take place in the largest maritime exercise ever conducted in the vast Indian Ocean.”

The latter is a reference to the Malabar Exercise, a yearly Indian-hosted naval war game. In 2015 it was transformed into a trilateral affair with the addition of Japan as a third permanent participant, alongside the US and India.

A key US strategic objective is to use India to enhance its domination over the Indian Ocean, the waterway that bears most of China’s exports to Europe, Africa and the Middle East and most of the oil and other resources that fuel China’s economy.

For his part, Modi said India is committed to working with the US across the Indo-Pacific region “in order to protect our strategic interests” and to developing a “bilateral architecture that will take our strategic partnership to new heights.” He went on to laud Washington for naming India a Major Defense Partner of the US, which gives it access to advanced US weapons systems that the Pentagon allows only its closest allies to purchase, and for the India-US Defense Trade and Technology Initiative, under which New Delhi and Washington are working on the codevelopment and coproduction of armaments.

“The strengthening of India’s defense capabilities, with the help of the USA, is something that we truly appreciate,” said Modi. Both the joint statement and Modi in his press conference remarks referred to plans to enhance Indo-US “maritime security cooperation,” but provided no details.

Earlier this year, Admiral Harry Harris, the head of the US Pacific Command, revealed that the US and India are sharing intelligence on Chinese submarine and ship movements in the Indian Ocean. Washington has repeatedly urged New Delhi to agree to joint naval patrols in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, including the South China Sea.

With a view to boosting India’s military capabilities and demonstrating the importance it attaches to the US partnership with India, the Trump administration approved, on the eve of Modi’s Washington visit, the sale of 22 naval Predator surveillance drones to New Delhi for \$2.3 billion.

Underlining the drones’ potential importance in countering China, the *New York Times* observed, “The drones, which have never before been sold to a non-NATO country, could be especially valuable if they are flown over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands [which lie close to the western end of the Straits of Malacca], giving India control of a so-called choke point that is one of China’s greatest marine vulnerabilities.”

As a further strategic “favour” to India, the Trump administration agreed to the inclusion of strong language critical of Pakistan in the joint statement. It said the two leaders “called on

Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks on other countries” and “to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai, Pathankot, and other cross-border terrorist attacks perpetrated by Pakistan-based groups.”

Over the past year Modi has mounted a bellicose campaign against Pakistan, labeling it the “mother ship” of world terrorism and asserting an Indian right to mount illegal cross-border raids inside Pakistan until it stops all logistical support to anti-Indian Kashmiri separatists from inside Pakistan. Soon after arriving in the US on Sunday, Modi made a point of trumpeting the “surgical strikes” India conducted inside Pakistan last September, saying that as a result “the world experienced our power and realized that India practices restraint but can show power when needed.”

Just hours before the Trump-Modi meeting, the US State Department designated Syed Salahuddin, the chief of Hizbul Mujahideen, a pro-Pakistan Kashmir separatist militia, a “global terrorist,” fulfilling a longtime Indian request. Hailing the action, Indian officials said it “vindicated” New Delhi’s stance that the popular unrest in Kashmir is a result of Pakistani-backed terrorism.

The South China Sea, North Korea and Afghanistan

The Pentagon and US State Department were ecstatic when Modi signed on to US-scripted language on the South China Sea dispute in a joint statement issued with Obama in January 2015. Ever since, India has faithfully parroted the US position, painting Beijing as the aggressor, when it is the US that, in the name of “freedom of navigation” and “overflight,” is asserting the right to deploy its military might off the coast of China.

What stands out in the most recent statement emanating from an Indo-US leaders’ summit is New Delhi’s staunch support for the Trump administration’s stance on North Korea. India is giving full-throated support to Washington even as it declares the end of “strategic patience” with Pyongyang, with the transparent aim of stoking a crisis on the Korean Peninsula so as to pressure and threaten China.

According to the joint statement, Modi and Trump “strongly condemned” North Korea’s “continued provocations” and “pledged to work together to counter” its “weapons of mass destruction programs, including by holding accountable all parties that support these programs.”

In keeping with Washington’s ratcheting up of tensions with Pyongyang, India recently halted all trade with North Korea except for food and medicine. Until that ban, India had been North Korea’s second-largest trading partner after China.

Trump thanked India at the White House lawn press conference “for joining us in applying new sanctions” against North Korea, adding, “the North Korean regime is causing tremendous problems and is something that has to be dealt with, and probably dealt with rapidly.”

The joint statement also said the two countries would work together in Afghanistan, where the US war of occupation is now in its seventeenth year. Modi reiterated this point at the press

conference, saying “both India and America have played an important role in rebuilding Afghanistan and ensuring its security.” He pledged to “maintain close consultation and communication” with Washington over Afghanistan.

Important sections of India’s elite had wanted Modi to raise their concerns over the impact of Trump’s economic nationalist “America First” policies, including new limits on H1-B visas, which are widely used by Indian IT firms. But the Indian prime minister was at pains to downplay differences with Washington, so as not to in any way impede the further strengthening of the Indo-US strategic alliance, which the Indian bourgeoisie views as vital to realizing its own great power ambitions.

Modi hailed the US “as our primary partner for India’s social and economic transformation,” claimed that Trump’s “vision” for “making America great again” converges with his plans for a “new India,” and in the most obsequious language repeatedly thanked Trump “for spending so much time with me.”

Trump praised Modi for his pro-big business policies, but made clear that he expects Modi’s government to do much more to open India’s economy to US investment and exports.

Prior to Monday’s summit there was a raft of anxious commentary in the Indian press about Trump and whether his administration will prioritize ties with India to the extent that both George W. Bush and Obama did. However, in its aftermath there was a collective sigh of relief from India’s corporate media.

China, meanwhile, has grown increasingly alarmed by the extent to which India has aligned itself with Washington. In a comment published Monday, the state-owned *Global Times* noted that “the US has cozied up to India” in recent years “to ratchet up geopolitical pressure on India.”

It continued with a blunt warning: “To assume a role as an outpost country in the US’ strategy to contain China is not in line with India’s interests. It could even lead to catastrophic results.”