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Pompeo touts Indo-US alliance, bullies New Delhi

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo trumpeted Washington and New Delhi's anti-China alliance during a three-day visit to India that concluded yesterday. But while Pompeo publicly proclaimed that the Indo-US "global strategic partnership" is reaching "new heights," he used his visit to ratchet up pressure on New Delhi to comply with a long list of incendiary US demands.

The top US diplomat arrived in India from the Middle East. There he had conferred with the absolutist rulers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on further aggression against Iran, which is already the target of economic sanctions that are tantamount to war and a menacing US military build-up.

Last week, according to the White House's own admission, US warplanes were just ten minutes away from striking Iran, when they were called back due to trepidations about the consequences of launching a war that would set the entire Mideast ablaze and likely trigger the intervention of other great powers.

Iran figured large in the discussions between Pompeo and his Indian counterpart, External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, a fact the US Secretary of State was eager to underscore. At their joint press conference, Pompeo denounced Tehran as the "world's largest state sponsor of terror," and claimed that there was "a shared understanding" to "deter this threat—not only the threat in the narrow confines of the Middle East, but the threat that this terror regime poses to the entire world."

Jaishankar, for his part, indicated that on the question of Iran and a host of other issues, New Delhi and Washington are at odds. Referring to what he termed their “fairly detailed discussions” on “the situation in the Persian Gulf,” he said, “I think he (Pompeo) knows that we have big stakes there; stakes of energy, of diaspora, of trade, of regional stability.”

But Jaishankar also signaled that these are disagreements among friends, and that India’s Bharatiya Janata Party-led government is not going to jeopardize its partnership with American imperialism for the sake merely of upholding international law and seeking to prevent a catastrophic war.

India opposed the Trump administration’s May 2018 abrogation of the Iran nuclear accord, and claims that it has yet to take a final decision on whether it will abide with Washington’s demand that all countries cease importing Iranian oil.

In reality, however, New Delhi is enforcing the US sanctions. Previously Iran’s second largest oil export market, India is currently importing no Iranian oil.

The US sanctions against Iran have also dealt a strategic blow to India. Last year, New Delhi made much of the fact that the Trump administration had granted a “sanctions waiver” allowing it to continue developing unimpeded Chabahar, Iran’s principal Arabian Sea port, as a commercial hub linking India to Afghanistan and to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, where it is vying with China for influence. However, to the chagrin of the Indian elite, this waiver has proven a dead letter. Terrified of running afoul of the US sanctions regime, banks, shipping and insurance companies have balked at supporting the Chabahar project.

Pompeo also pressed India to continue curbing its oil imports from Venezuela, another historically oppressed country that Washington has targeted for regime change. In a speech earlier this month to the US-India Business Council, Pompeo promoted the US as a source of oil and natural gas for India, “so they will no longer have to rely on difficult regimes like those in Venezuela and in Iran.”

Pompeo also pressed New Delhi to exclude the Chinese-based Huawei Technologies from the development of India’s 5G network, warning that failure to do so would have consequences for Indo-US intelligence sharing.

And he reiterated Washington’s demand that the BJP government, which is preparing a new salvo of “big bang” pro-investor reforms for the first budget of its second term, remove whatever barriers remain to US investment.

Pompeo's message was punctuated by a tweet from Trump later Wednesday in which he denounced New Delhi for having imposed "unacceptable" tariffs on 28 US products earlier this month. The US president went on to boast that he would prevail on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to remove them when they meet on the sidelines of this weekend's G20 summit in Japan.

India has in fact repeatedly turned the other cheek in the face of provocative US trade actions. The tariffs it imposed on June 21 were crafted in response to Trump's tariffs on Indian steel and aluminum exports to the US, and were originally slated to take effect a year ago.

What finally drove the BJP government to act was Washington's May 31 announcement removing tariff-free access for \$6.1 billion worth of Indian exports, on the grounds that India no longer merits special treatment as a developing country.

Of all the "America First" demands and threats Pompeo issued while in New Delhi potentially the most explosive was that pertaining to India's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air defense system.

In recent weeks, senior Trump administration officials have publicly threatened India with sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) if it proceeds with its \$5 billion S-400 purchase.

Earlier, some senior figures in the administration, such as the former Defense Secretary James Mattis, argued against strong-arming New Delhi over the S-400 purchase. They calculated that if Washington threatened to sanction India it could end up overplaying its hand and thus jeopardize both the US drive to integrate India ever more deeply into its anti-China offensive and its long-term efforts to break the decades-old military-security alliance between India and Russia.

But with the Trump administration and American ruling elite as a whole adopting an ever more aggressive stance, due to their fears about the rapidity of the erosion of US global economic and geopolitical power, this more cautious approach has been jettisoned.

In written testimony to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee earlier this month, senior State Department official Alice Wells brandished the sanctions threat, warned the S-400 purchase would limit Indo-US military ties, and bluntly declared that India is fast approaching a make or break decision on its strategic orientation. "At a certain point,"

declared Wells, “a strategic choice has to be made about partnerships and a strategic choice about what weapons systems and platforms a country is going to adopt.”

Indicating that the S-400 purchase had been a major source of tensions during Pompeo’s visit, Jaishankar told Wednesday’s joint press conference, that “on the CAATSA issue” he had explained to the US Secretary of State “in some detail” that India must act in its “national interest” and “part of ... (a) strategic partnership is the ability of each country to comprehend and appreciate the national interest of the other.”

How exactly this will unfold in the coming weeks and months is uncertain.

India’s ruling elite has clearly been taken aback by the ever-expanding list of US “asks” and by the descent of global geopolitics into the type of one against all rivalries that characterized the decade prior to the outbreak of World War II. “The U.S. can’t be harming India and still saying it’s a strategic partner,” exclaimed Navtej Sarna, India’s ambassador to the United States from 2016 to 2018. In a column published Thursday, the *Hindu*’s diplomatic editor, Suhasini Haidar, warned that India’s attempt to straddle the principal fissures in world geopolitics is becoming “unsustainable.” “India,” she insisted, “needs a substantive, more clearly defined account of its own objectives to steer its strategic course in these stormy times.”

Continuing down the path blazed by the previous Congress Party-led regime, the BJP government has made the Indo-US strategic alliance the cornerstone of India’s foreign policy. Whilst there is much handwringing in New Delhi over Washington’s bullying and unilateralism, the dominant faction of the Indian bourgeoisie is ready to double-down on its reckless gamble that it can realize its great-power ambitions by assisting American imperialism in thwarting China’s challenge to its dominance of the Indo-Pacific.

Indeed, even as Indian business and strategic columnists fret over the impact of Trump’s trade war measures on the Indian and world economy, they proclaim the US-China conflict a golden opportunity for India to woo US and Japanese transnationals and challenge China’s position as the world’s foremost manufacturing production-chain hub.

The Indo-US alliance is encouraging the ruling elites of both countries in aggression and war. The acute danger it represents for the masses of South Asia and the world has been starkly demonstrated by the three war crises India has been embroiled in since the fall of 2016, two involving arch-rival Pakistan and the third, a ten-week military standoff over a remote Himalayan plateau, with China.

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