

French President Hollande presses for major arms deals in India

By Kumaran Ira
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In his first state visit to Asia since taking office last May, French President François Hollande visited India on February 14-15. Accompanied by a delegation of ministers and executives of over 60 top French corporations, Hollande sought to reinforce trade and strategic ties between the two countries, particularly through large-scale arms deals.

Hollande pushed for the conclusion of a more than \$10 billion deal to sell 126 Rafale fighter jets to India. The deal, which is expected to be signed by the middle of this year, would be the world's biggest purchase of warplanes in 15 years. France and India also concluded talks on a \$6 billion project to co-develop short-range surface-to-air missiles.

Though the deal is not yet signed, talks are also proceeding between French nuclear firm Areva and the state-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India for a \$9.3 billion contract to build a 9,900-megawatt nuclear power plant at Jaitapur in the western state of Maharashtra.

In Delhi, Hollande said, “We come from a great partnership, India and France, and we must always improve the relationship between our two countries. India is a great democracy, the biggest democracy of the world, a country which is developing, and France must be with you in this challenge.”

For his part, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, “India regards France as one of its most valued strategic partners.”

Hollande's visit to India exemplifies the cynical and reactionary character of imperialist diplomacy. While imposing massive job cuts at automakers Renault and Peugeot-Citroën and other draconian austerity measures, Hollande is trying to prop up the shrinking French economy by winning contracts that fan the flames of the arms race in Asia.

A country still plagued by deep mass poverty and chronic hunger, India reportedly overtook China to become the biggest arms-importing nation in 2010. In 2011, India's military expenditure, excluding nuclear weapons, was \$44.28 billion. Over the next decade, India reportedly plans to spend \$150 billion modernising, upgrading and maintaining its military equipment. Defence analysts *IHS Jane's* predicted that India would surpass France, Japan and the UK to become the fourth-biggest defence spender in the world by 2020, trailing only the US, China and Russia.

The US—which under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama has publicly declared its eagerness to help India become a “world power”—is supporting India's military build-up. It has staged numerous joint exercises with India, proposed a series of arms deals, and negotiated a unique status for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime that gives it access to nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology, thereby allowing New Delhi to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

The US views India as pivotal to its efforts to contain a “rising” China, and has sought to draw India into a broader alliance with countries deemed hostile to China across the Asia-Pacific region. For its part, India, which fought a border war with China in 1962, views Beijing as its principal rival for influence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. (China is described by the Pakistani elite as the country's “all-weather friend”). Moreover, Asia's two principal rising powers are both highly dependent on oil imports and have emerged as important competitors for energy and other resources in virtually all parts of the globe.

In Asia as elsewhere, Hollande has continued his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy's policy of closely aligning France's foreign policy with that of

Washington. Like Washington, Paris sees the Indian bourgeoisie as an important ally in its imperialist wars and operations.

With US and NATO forces set to partially withdraw from Afghanistan by 2014, France and the US have encouraged India to play a major role in Afghanistan. This includes training Afghan security forces.

On February 15, at a lecture at the Nehru Memorial Library in Delhi, Hollande also thanked India for its “understanding and support” for the French war in Mali. Carried out under the pretext of fighting Islamic terrorism, the French invasion of Mali aims to re-establish France’s domination over its former western African colonies so as to secure its geostrategic interests against rival powers in Africa, particularly China.

India is actively participating, having promised to join the Support and Follow-Up Group (SFG) for Mali. Recently, it committed \$1 million to upgrade the Malian army, also pledging an additional \$100 million contribution after the conflict ends. India’s support for the Mali war is rooted in its growing geostrategic interests in Africa, as well as its escalating rivalry with China, and its historic enmity to Muslim Pakistan, which has supported anti-Indian Islamacist forces in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

After Indian officials met with representatives of the European powers and African nations in Brussels a week ago, New Delhi issued a statement that noted, “We have already implemented five projects in Mali, in diverse sectors such as agriculture, power and food processing through a concessional credit of over \$150 million. We would be funding execution of another major power project in Mali through a line of credit of \$100 million.”

In exchange for Indian support in Mali, Hollande supported India’s claims to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. He called India a “power of peace”, adding, “Today we ask for India to be a full-fledged member of the United Nations Security Council, to reflect the current realities.”

Hollande’s promotion of India as a “power of peace”—as he peddles it arms to pursue a massive military build-up against its regional rivals, particularly Pakistan and China—is patently absurd. Relations between India and Pakistan remain extremely tense, with a “comprehensive peace” process effectively

stalled since 2008 and both powers accusing the other of hostile intentions and competing for influence across the region. In January there was a series of bloody border clashes over the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed Kashmir area and last week Indian forces killed a Pakistani soldier who inadvertently crossed over into Indian-held Kashmir.

Before Hollande’s visit, *Le Monde* interviewed Uday Bhaskar, a former Indian Navy officer and a researcher at the Society for Policy Studies, a New Delhi think tank. Bhaskar noted that India is concerned by the cooperation between China and Pakistan in nuclear weapons and missiles, and also outlined India’s substantial military and oil interests in Southeast Asia.

A key element in India’s military expansion is the development of a “blue water navy.” India aims to play a major role in the Indian Ocean and these ambitions have been encouraged by Washington

Asked about the Indian Ocean, Bhaskar said, “The presence of China in the Indian Ocean is gradually becoming reality. One sees it through the growing ties with the Seychelles, the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, or Myanmar. This offensive is driven by what the Chinese call the ‘Malacca dilemma,’ that is, the fact that over half their oil imports pass through this strait [the Malacca Strait], which is controlled by potentially hostile powers. China is also anxious about the US and India due to the vulnerability of its maritime routes.”

Hollande expressed French support for India’s role in the Indian Ocean, assuring India that France would do its part to maintain security in the Indian Ocean.

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