

US defence secretary boosts military ties with India

By K. Ratnayake
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Amid rising tensions with China over the South China Sea, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter spent three days in India, ending yesterday, in order to strengthen military ties with New Delhi. The centrepiece of his trip was the signing of a new 10-year defence framework, signaled during President Obama's visit to India in January, to enhance the US-India strategic partnership.

Carter pointedly began his tour by visiting the Indian navy's Eastern Command in Visakhapatnam, which is tasked with patrolling in the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. The US embassy in New Delhi noted that Carter's visit to the navy base "specifically... showcased his commitment to maritime security and the need for regional security architecture."

Throughout his trip, Carter ratcheted up the US denunciations of China's land reclamation activities in the South China Sea. At last weekend's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, he demanded "an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation" and insisted that the US would continue its provocative "freedom of navigation" operations by military aircraft and warships that challenge China's territorial claims.

Speaking at the Singapore defence forum, India's Minister of State for Defence, Rao Inderjit Singh echoed Carter's words, saying India was also concerned about "freedom of navigation" and "opposed the threat or unilateral use of force to resolve maritime territorial disputes." In reality, it is the United States that is stirring up tensions in the South China Sea and encouraging allies and strategic partners like India to paint China as the aggressor.

During his speech, Carter specifically singled out "India's Act East policy" as a strategy that the US supported. The "Act East" policy has underpinned both India's economic drive and its projection of naval

forces into South East Asia. China has already criticised deals signed between Vietnam and the state-owned Indian company ONGC Videsh to conduct energy exploration in the South China Sea.

During his visit to India, Carter met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, along with Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

The Prime Minister's Office reported that, during his meeting with Carter, Modi expressed the hope that "US companies, including those in the defence manufacturing sector, would actively participate in the 'Make in India' initiative and set up manufacturing units in India." For his part, the US Defence Secretary stressed India's importance as a strategic partner and said the US "pivot" or "rebalance" in Asia complemented India's Act East Policy.

Washington clearly has high hopes in Modi and his right-wing Bharatiya Janatha Party-led government. The *New York Times*, for instance, commented that Modi "came to office last year with a broader vision of India as a global power, and a far greater affinity for the United States than his predecessors." The article explained that the Pentagon had established "a special India team" to help cut through bureaucratic red tape and develop closer relations.

Carter was enthusiastic about the prospects of greater collaboration on developing military equipment. "Jet engines, aircraft carrier technology are big projects that we're working very hard on to blaze the trail for things to come," he told reporters.

Details of the new defence framework have not been released. However, it undoubtedly represents another significant shift into Washington's camp. The first 10-year defence framework agreement, signed in 2005,

represented a dramatic change in India's foreign policy orientation. During the Cold War, it had been aligned with the former Soviet Union.

The US has now surpassed Russia as India's single largest supplier of military hardware. It exported \$68 million worth of equipment to India in 2010. Just four years later, the figure has risen to \$2,268 million. As Washington intensifies its confrontation with Moscow, it is seeking to undermine India's longstanding defence ties with Russia.

In line with the aggressive stance toward China taken by the US, India sent four warships to South China Sea for joint naval exercises with Singapore last week. The vessels will also make port calls in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and finally Fremantle, Western Australia. The Indian warships include a stealth frigate and an anti-submarine warfare vessel.

Reiterating the message from the Shangri-La Dialogue, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj commented on Sunday: "India believes in the freedom of navigation. Indian oil exploration activities in the South China Sea are in accordance with all international laws. Statements [by China] threatening use of force are not appropriate as both countries are committed to resolve the issue."

Despite closer US-Indian ties, New Delhi remains concerned about the ramifications of alienating China. The US is pressing India to include Japan in its annual Malabar naval exercises. NDTV noted that the issue was high on Carter's agenda, but Indian officials dodged the request, saying that it would look like an anti-China grouping. A top defence ministry official told NDTV that India was unlikely to invite Japan to the Malabar war games in October.

While developing strategic relations with Washington, New Delhi wants the US to cut back its financial and military backing for India's traditional rival, Pakistan. During the discussions with Carter, India raised concerns about the US sale of arms to Pakistan, particularly F-16 fighters, and the provision of \$1 billion in aid.

The Indian political establishment's deepening strategic relations with US imperialism are compounding the already sharp geo-political tensions in Asia being fuelled by the US military build-up throughout the region. As Washington steps up its provocations against China in the South China Sea, the

danger is rising of a catastrophic war involving nuclear-armed powers.

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