

India to become hub for US Seventh Fleet

By Keith Jones
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Under a deal announced earlier this week, India will become a major service and repair hub for the US Seventh Fleet—the armada that is at the center of US war preparations against China.

The deal gives flesh and blood to a recent Indo-US agreement giving US warplanes and battleships routine access to Indian bases and ports for rest, refuel, and resupply. Signed last August, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) also allows the US military to “forward” deploy war materiel at Indian bases.

Reliance Defence and Engineering announced last Monday that it has signed a “Master Ship Repair Agreement” with the Pentagon to service and repair Seventh Fleet warships and supply and patrol vessels at its shipyard at Pipavav, in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

According to a Reliance official, the shipyard stands to carry out as much as 100 billion rupees (US\$1.3 billion) worth of work for the US Navy over the next five years.

This is potentially a massive profit windfall for Reliance Defence, given that in 2014 the company’s total revenues were less than \$50 million.

“Over 100 ships of US Navy operating in the Indian Ocean can now avail services at Pipavav shipyard,” crowed a company spokesman. He added that the US Navy “follows some of the most stringent standards, so we are hopeful that this deal would lead to us bagging similar projects in other countries as well.”

The Ship Repair Agreement comes close on the heels of the US Navy designating the Reliance shipyard an “approved contractor.”

The Seventh Fleet has responsibility for the western Pacific and the eastern stretches of the Indian Ocean up to the India-Pakistan border. As such it is at the center of US plans to wage war on China. These plans includes imposing an economic blockade on China by

seizing control of the Straits of Malacca and other Indian Ocean/South China Sea chokepoints and mounting a massive bombardment of Chinese military installations, cities and infrastructure—what the Pentagon calls its “Air Sea Battle” plan.

Hitherto, maintenance and repairs on the Seventh Fleet have been carried out in Japan and Singapore.

The repair deal is driven by geostrategic considerations. Washington has long been seeking to harness New Delhi to its strategic agenda and make India the southwestern pillar of a quadrilateral anti-China alliance, led by the US and including its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

The Indian bourgeoisie, for its part, has tilted ever more sharply toward Washington, in the hopes of drawing on US support in pursuing its own predatory great power ambitions.

Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have not only unabashedly declared the US to be India’s most important ally. Since coming to office in 2014, they have effectively transformed India into a “frontline” state in the US confrontation with China.

New Delhi has adopted Washington’s provocative stance on the South China Sea dispute that paints China as an aggressor and has enormously expanded bilateral and trilateral strategic ties with the US, Japan, and Australia.

Recently, the head of the US Pacific Command, Harry Harris, revealed that the US and Indian militaries are sharing intelligence on Chinese submarine and ship movements in the Indian Ocean.

Although this is all but unknown to the Indian people, under the LEMOA the US could use Indian military bases to wage war if New Delhi gives its consent.

Getting India to agree to a LEMOA type-agreement was a major foreign political goal of Washington ever since India and the US formed a “global strategic

partnership” in 2005.

No doubt both Washington and New Delhi though it politic that the Pentagon’s first publicly proclaimed use of the LEMOA should bring, or at least appear to bring, significant economic rewards to India.

To help Reliance clinch its deal with the Pentagon, the BJP state government in Gujarat is giving the company tens of millions of dollars in aid to upgrade its shipyard. Modi was himself Gujarat’s chief minister until he became India’s prime minister in May 2014, and he continues to dominant the state BJP.

Reliance Defence and Engineering is owned by the multibillionaire Amil Ambani. Mukesh Ambani, his brother, is India’s richest man with a fortune of more than US\$23 billion. Both Ambani brothers are strong supporters of Modi and helped spearhead corporate India’s push for him to become the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate in the 2014 elections.

India’s corporate media is staunchly in favor of the Indo-US alliance. Yet even it recalled that Washington used the Seventh Fleet to threaten India during the December 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. At the time, Pakistan was a major Cold War ally of the US, whereas India, spooked by Washington’s recent overtures to China, had just signed a Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union.

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