

India Okays Pre-Emptive War: Threat or Support?

by Ramtanu Maitra

On Sept. 30, while attending the World Bank-International Monetary Fund jamboree in Washington, India's Finance Minister Jaswant Singh declared that every country has the right to pre-emptive war, and that this doctrine is not the prerogative of any one nation. "Pre-emption or prevention is inherent in deterrence. While there is deterrence, there is pre-emption," Singh said. "The same thing is there in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter," which gave all states the right to self-defense.

If one wonders why a finance minister felt obligated to issue a statement befitting a defense or a foreign minister, let it be said that Jaswant Singh, till recently, was India's External Affairs Minister, and for a short while had also acted as Defense Minister. Singh was also involved in the long and intense post-Pokhran negotiations (following India's nuclear test in May 1998) with President Bill Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, who now heads the Brookings Institution, a think-tank in Washington. It is likely that the Indian Finance Minister has not given up his old job completely.

Why Such a Statement

Why would Singh issue the statement at such a sensitive time, particularly since most in India felt relieved when U.S. President George Bush, by going to the UN Security Council, opted ostensibly for a multilateral approach in the U.S. conflict with Iraq. New Delhi knows that President Bush has kept the pre-emptive strike option open, and that makes Jaswant Singh's statement more intriguing.

In the context of the tense situation that exists along the India-Pakistan borders, Minister Singh's statement can be construed as a threat. On a closer look, however, it seems that Singh might be conveying India's tacit approval to the United States' fall-back plan to act unilaterally and launch a pre-emptive strike against Iraq.

"Every nation has the right [to launch a pre-emptive strike]. It is not the prerogative of any one country. Pre-emption is the right of any nation to prevent injury to itself," Singh stated. The leading Indian news daily, *The Hindu*, read this as a threat issued against Pakistan. In its editorial on Oct. 2, *The Hindu* wrote: "Jaswant Singh is treading dangerous ground in endorsing the doctrine of pre-emption that is being articulated by the U.S. President George W. Bush and his senior officials. He is quite mistaken in claiming a right for

India to act in pre-emptive mode, and in trying to minimize the ill-effects of a doctrine that has ominous portents irrespective of the circumstances and context in which it is to be applied.”

The statement cannot be taken seriously as a threat issued to convey to the Americans, that the Indians reserve the right to launch a similar pre-emptive strike against Pakistan. In India today, the growing closeness of U.S.-India relations in military affairs—some even see such strengthening of relations between the two in strategic affairs—draws regular headlines. The Indian army, which longed for American weapons and weapon-technologies throughout the Cold War days and were provided with less-sophisticated Russian weapons, seem to be the most active promoters of growing India-U.S. relations in military and strategic affairs.

India has also allowed U.S. intervention in its immediate neighborhood in the civil wars in Nepal and Sri Lanka. India’s dependence on the United States today is greater than ever in trying to keep its foothold in Afghanistan. In other words, beside the extremely significant economic tie-up, India has become wholly reliant on the United States in dealing with its neighbors.

Not to be underestimated, as well, are growing U.S.-Pakistan relations. The U.S. acquisition of 54,000 acres on a 99-year lease in the North West Frontier Province and Balochistan, as reported in the media, makes it evident that Washington is planning to establish a base in Pakistan, and not only to direct its operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, but to use it simultaneously as a jump-off point for Central Asia.

In recent days, Washington made efforts to remove certain New Delhi delusions, by making it clear that Pakistan is not only an ally, but it must be strengthened financially and militarily. The United States has decided to refurbish Pakistan’s depleted military arsenal, and there is likelihood that Islamabad may even receive the F-16 fighter-bombers contracted years before, but never delivered. It is clear America now considers the military imbalance in the Indian subcontinent, caused by India’s focus on national security, a matter of great concern.

Endorsement To Attack Iraq?

In addition, on the very day Jaswant Singh was justifying a pre-emptive strike as not a violation of the UN Charter, U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz was addressing the U.S.-Pakistan Business Council. Wolfowitz, the loudest voice in the chorus for a pre-emptive strike against Iraq, said on that occasion that the United States has “provided economic assistance worth \$2 billion and is negotiating with Congress for an additional \$1 billion promised by President Bush last week when he met the Pakistani Ambassador.” He said the U.S. government is confident of defeating “terrorists in Pakistan and elsewhere with the assistance from the Musharraf government.”

What follows is that since the United States has made war against terrorism its priority, President Pervez Musharraf and Pakistan must be supported to the full. Under the circumstances, it is naive to believe that Washington would tolerate India’s launching any attack against Pakistan.

If, then, Minister Jaswant Singh’s statement was not a threat, it was intended as an endorsement to the United States’ stated determination to attack Iraq. Such a policy, though somewhat unnerving, fits with India’s balancing act in conducting its foreign policy in the Middle East. Some Indian commentators portray its ties with the Middle East as a classic reversal of alliances, with a new strategic alliance among India, Israel, and Japan forming the skeleton of a “China containment” strategy, another Washington-based think-tank, CSIS, claimed months ago. According to this view, India’s defense ties with Israel will “protect” India’s energy sources in the Middle East, and relationships with the countries on China’s periphery will deter threatening moves from Beijing.

Miscalculation

Although the pattern of India’s ties in the Middle East has changed significantly in the past decade, this analysis by the CSIS overstates the importance of the India-Israel connection, and understates the risk of an Arab backlash. It is likely that India’s ties with Israel will continue to grow, particularly in the areas of military hardware supplies.

On the other hand, within the Arab and Muslim world, the countries of greatest importance to India have shifted: Egypt is somewhat less important than it once was; Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Iran are more so. While India recognizes that its engagement with the Arabs is key, it has not made serious efforts to break new ground in the last few years.

India has received increasing criticism from the Arab countries for its closer ties with Israel. A concrete sign of Arab displeasure was expressed two years ago, when the Saudis abruptly cancelled the proposed visit by the then-External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh. The Saudis cancelled the visit on the grounds that it conflicted with a meeting with the Presidents of Egypt and Syria—which, in fact, did not take place until a number of days later.

Why the Saudi kingdom chose to snub India was never spelled out, it is evident that India’s inability to speak out clearly against the Israeli blackmailing of the Palestinians, or against the U.S.-Britain-led drumbeat of war against Iraq, are indications that New Delhi is not willing to mend fences with the Arab countries.

***To reach us on the Web:
www.larouchepub.com***